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Emmett Till in the Literary Imagination

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EMMETT TILL IN THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

by

Loretta McBride

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DEDICATION

For the children

For Sylvia's: Shelley, Jessie, Eddie, Modree, and Dan

For Modree's: Edna, Odell, John, Tommie, Loretta, and Nathaniel

For mine: Marlon Gregory

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ABSTRACT

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Emmett Till was lynched in 1955 in Money, Mississippi, for whistling at a white woman. He was 14-years-old. The racially-motivated killing was so brutal that the body was just a grotesque, monstrous glob, unrecognizable to most of his kin. Media published the photo, which was a clarion call to the freedom fighters. Since then, artists have celebrated his young life. Using many genres and media, they have talked about his sexuality, his masculinity, and the impact of his death on our country, making Till one of the most written about historical figures in Black art. Much of the literature addresses Emmett's emerging masculinity and mourns his and all Black masculinity cut short. Others claim his murder as the spark that began the Civil Rights Movement. His death required a collective response.

This dissertation analyzes the different forms of expression and makes connections that invite further dialogue. Gwendolyn Brooks' poem dissects the white fairy tale, in which Black males become undeserving villains. Many of Nikki Giovanni's poems include Emmett and Mamie Till as symbols of racism. Audre Lorde devotes one long narrative poem to the effects of his death and the death photo. Bebe Moore Campbell's novel relates the impact of Till's death in the Black and white communities; whereas, Lewis Nordan's focus is the white community. Still, other artists look at the social dialectic of race and sex. This social taboo is so pervasive that it has survived well into the 21st century dialogues about men and women and crime and punishment. James Baldwin, in the 20th century, and Scott Poulson-Bryant, in the 21st century, discuss Black

masculinity and the racist society. No matter the topic, the literary artists cannot forget a boy who thought that he had the right to express his appreciation for the opposite sex. For these artists, Emmett Till functions as a trope for truncated Black masculine sexual identity and the face of racism, which ignited a resistance movement.

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone over ten knows the story. Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy, went to visit his granduncle in Money, Mississippi, in 1955. Accustomed to a freer society, he bragged to his country cousins about his white girlfriends in Chicago, even showing a picture of one. Supposedly, on a dare from those country cousins, he whistled at a local, white store owner, Carolyn Bryant. The two were alone in the store. Accounts varied as to the offense: an appreciative wolf whistle, a suggestive remark, a grab around her waist, or a whistle to disguise a stutter. No matter, Carolyn Bryant told her husband Roy and his half brother J.W. Milan of this rape-by-whistle. Bryant and Milan went to Uncle Moses' home that night and demanded Emmett. Thinking that Bryant and Milan would chastise the wayward Negro, Uncle Moses watched helplessly as they took Emmett. Uncle Moses never saw him alive again. Three days later, Emmett's body surfaced and was rescued from the Tallahatchie River. The body had been shot, brutally beaten, axed, and weighted with a cotton gin fan to keep it submerged in the river. Unrecognizable, Emmett had to be identified by externals, such as his ring and clothes. Since Bryant and his brother had come to Uncle Moses' house to get Emmett, everyone knew who had committed the murder. There were even ear-witness accounts of screams and violence coming from a barn where Emmett spent his last hours. Yet, until the northern newspapers took interest, the brothers were free. They were arrested for Emmett's murder, but were acquitted in what *Ebony* reporters describe as a carnival atmosphere (Larsson 5).

Moving against the Mississippi power structure, Mamie Till took her son's body, un-retouched, back to Chicago and opened the casket for "the world to see what they did to [her] boy" (Giovanni 8-9). The juxtaposition of the good-looking youngster and the

grotesque image (Figs. 1, 4) horrified the nation. The death photo illustrated not merely a trespass, but a message to Negroes about staying in their prescribed social places. The death photo was not a hanging body or a gunshot body; it was racism unleashed and unchecked. With her son's body too ugly for people to believe, Mamie Till held a public viewing, which moved the nation.

Since then, Emmett Till has become one of the most written about historical figures in literature. Countless poems, essays, films, fiction, drama, and websites, all celebrate a life too short. Some authors reverently call his name or mention a detail that jogs the collective memory. Nikki Giovanni's poetry often protests the conditions of Black people, and because Emmett's story became part of the collective identity, Giovanni often name drops. Realistic in her imagining of Till, she will call his name as representative of Black men accused of rape or as representative of the violence committed against Black men. As a single mother of one son herself, Giovanni, too, empathizes with Mamie Till, a woman who became the universal mother of murdered sons. Gwendolyn Brooks devotes a poem to Mamie Till's pain. Other artists fictionalize Emmett Till's story, using enough historical details to make him instantly recognizable. Weaving a heroic romance, Brooks uses the historical details in one poem, characterizing the principal players as fairy tale stereotypes. Eschewing the romance, Bebe Moore Campbell realistically imagines the effects of Till's murder on all of those involved. Lewis Nordan uses Emmett Till's nickname, Bobo, which, along with a few historical accuracies, makes his caricatures all the more startling. All are irrevocably affected by the death photo, none more that Audre Lorde, who wrote "Afterimages" after being assaulted by Till's death photo. Elizabeth Alexander uses the historical boxer, Ali, to tell

how he was affected by the image of the death photo. Kenneth Beauchamp says that he spent nine years of his life researching Emmett's story and making a documentary because he was haunted by the death photo of Emmett Till.

Specifically, the literature addresses Emmett's emerging masculinity and mourns his and all Black masculinity cut short. These artists claim the Black males' right to exist sexually, just as white males. These concepts appear in Anthony Walton's poem, Toni Morrison's fiction, and Scott Poulson-Bryant's meditation. James Baldwin's characters wrestle with what it means to be a Black man in America, where most concepts are defined by white males. Others attribute his murder to the birth of the Civil Rights Movement. His death was the last horror that Blacks would bow their heads for. They stood and sat to protest unchecked violence committed against them because of historically institutionalized racism. Giovanni certainly provides this link in much of her poetry. Still, other artists look at the social dialectic of race and sex. This social taboo is so pervasive that it has survived well into the 21st century dialogues about Black men and white women and crime and punishment. In the 19th century, Ida B. Wells raised an objection to the lynch law, which hanged Black males for their associations with white females. Three authors theorize on this dialectic in the 20th century: Eldridge Cleaver, Calvin C. Hernton, and Earl Ofari Hutchinson. Continuing the dialogue about the Black male image and sexuality in the 21st century is Scott Poulson-Bryant, who understands the impact of Emmett Till's death on the discussion. These theorists use historical documents, statistics, anecdotes, and popular culture to prove their thesis that sexual and racial relations are inextricably linked. Baldwin's play certainly illustrates Cleaver's allegory about race and sex. Wanda Coleman's poem, in which she names Emmett Till,

does not shy away from the taboo expression of Black male sexuality with white females. No matter the topic or the literary text, the world cannot, will not forget a young boy who thought he had the right to express his appreciation for the opposite sex. For literary artists, Emmett Till functions as a trope for truncated Black masculine sexual identity and the face of racism, leading to resistance, in drama, poetry, fiction, and popular culture.

The fact that modern artists use their art to expose racism and brutality in the white community follows the history of theory in African American literature. Black art has had a social function since the literature of slavery and freedom. Frances E. W. Harper says that art that does not "represent," "reprimand," and "revise [is] useless" (Gates 493). She claims to make her songs for the people who cannot sing for themselves. A 19th century author and activist, she promotes the cause of the slave, the ex-slave, and the woman, changing her topic to fit the politics of the era. In "Criteria of Negro Art," W. E. B. DuBois writes the often quoted, "All art is propaganda and ever must be" (22). In this 1926 text, he admonishes artists to write the story that they know rather than bow to stereotypes. They must be free to tell the truth that shows the beauty and goodness in the human condition, because so far the tale has favored the white society (17-23). That same year, in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Langston Hughes warns that many artists do not write about Black life because they see it as shameful, but he says that there is a lot of material from the masses and the middle-class that the Negro artist can infuse with his own racial style. An artist should not be afraid to or ashamed to express the life of Black Americans (27-30). In 1937's "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Richard Wright knew that the Negro writer needs a "deep, informed, and complex consciousness" to write about Black life (49). He says that minority writers

need to display the same social consciousness and vision that minority workers use to advance their agenda. They need to adopt attitudes of self-consciousness and self-criticism and look upon the world as evolving rather than evolved and admirable. Calling for a Marxist vision which will allow freedom in thought and feeling, Wright claims that this vision will help the Negro change the world (45-53). In 1968, Malauna Karenga says that the social function of Black art outweighs the aesthetics. He adds, "Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution" (2087). The concepts of "art for art's sake" and "art for the people's sake" conflicted during the mid 1960s, when Black artists were trying to define a collective consciousness for the Black Arts Movement. In defining the Black aesthetic, Karenga says that the Black art has to be functional, collective, and committed. In addition to uplifting the people, the art must come from them and commit them to an arts movement that will change their existence (2086-90). A year later, another artist contributes to the creation of a Black aesthetic. In "The Black Writer and His Role," Carolyn F. Gerald talks about images being important to self-definition because of point of view which eliminates other views so that the view is not objective but a reshaping of reality. Western created myths kill Blacks' self-concept. She says that Black youth see the cultural and racial images that do not include them or that distort them and begin to question their right to exist. Some images that deal with color subtly show white as good and black as evil. More importantly, our ideas of manhood come from white America. Gerald says that the creation of positive white and negative black images was deliberate and contributed to the myth of superiority. She concludes that it is also another form of bondage, so Blacks are locked in conflict to control their own images (81-86). Modern Black artists have co-opted and now control

the image of Emmett Till. They use him to show how Black masculine identity is viewed by society as beastly and therefore needs to be eradicated. Through repetition, these artists hope to change the reality.

CHAPTER 1

Drama

The specter of Emmett Till appears in two plays, *Dreaming Emmett* by Toni Morrison and *Blues for Mister Charlie* by James Baldwin. Morrison's work, which was performed 1986 at the Marketplace Theater in Albany, NY, is not in print and won't be if the rumors that she destroyed all copies are true. However, Elizabeth Adams' review reveals the play's plot. It is about a boy, claiming to be Emmett Till, who comes back from the dead to make a movie about how events should have occurred so that he can stop dreaming about what happened. He assembles the characters who tell how they were affected by Emmett's death. With the introduction of a kite, the audience finds out that the boy is not Emmett, but someone who was shot in the back of his head by a white man for stealing the man's kite. Explaining his ruse, the boy says, "The man who shot me never saw my face. When that bullet hit me I never made a sound. I wanted to make a sound like Emmett did" (94). He is not Emmett, but he has been dreaming about Emmett. He wants to make the movie so that he can stop dreaming and rest. There are the racial conflicts in the play, says Adams, but also gender and class conflicts. Consistent with other artists is Morrison's use of the myths about Southern white women. The "injured" white female is called Princess, and her protector is Major, who "wears his jockey shorts outside his khakis" (93). Major's brother "wears his balls on his shoulder where they might do him some good" (93). As the characters try to explain their positions, then and now, Adams says that "the play prescribes no absolute morality" (94). Yet, the very question that the boy demands an answer to seems to point us toward a strong moral position. He asks, "Am I the last Emmett Till?" (92).

While little is known or has been written about Morrison's contribution to the Emmett Till trope, James Baldwin's play *Blues for Mister Charlie* has generated a broad scholarly discussion. Baldwin wrote his play and brought it to Broadway in 1964, just as Black Power and the artistic Black Arts Movement were gaining ascendancy over the Civil Rights Movement. Having a play on Broadway had been his dream even though he was leery about writing a play when too many, he says, were criticizing his skill as a novelist (*Blues* 6). Baldwin wanted an integrated audience, according to his biographer. He knew that whites would not attend if the play were not on Broadway and Blacks could not attend if the ticket price were not affordable. He lowered the price so much that the production closed after four months, although he thought that the director and producer had sabotaged the play. The director "complained of the antiwhite feeling generated by the script" (Leeming 232). In fact, "Many whites seemed to feel that Baldwin was somehow turning against them, that he was ungrateful for the white liberal's contribution to the struggle" (Leeming 238). Baldwin says that he, just as many others, was haunted by Emmett Till's murder. He took a trip to Mississippi and tagged along with Medgar Evers who was investigating the murder of a Black man by a white store owner who desired the Black man's wife. Hence, he had the basis for Lyle and Richard, two of the drama's main characters. The stage setting came to him when he passed a country church and was moved by the interior design and especially the picture of Jesus. While the play had a short run on Broadway, it did have "successful productions" (240) in Sweden, Germany, and Russia (Leeming 231-242). Baldwin claims that the play is loosely based on the murder of Emmett Till because he takes creative license with the historical details. The protagonist Richard Henry is a young adult, rather than a teenager, just returning to

the South from New York, where he became addicted to heroin and did time in prison for possession. He insults Lyle Britten, a local white merchant, and Lyle kills him. The murder scene opens the play. Lyle proposes, “And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds!” (13). In the last act, after his acquittal, Lyle gives further details about Richard’s last night, so there is never any doubt about Lyle’s guilt. Therefore, the play is not an exploration of guilt or innocence. It is about achieving manhood, as young Emmett, if the charge was true, thought he was doing. Yet, achieving or expressing one’s masculinity in the face of the racist, Christian South proves very difficult, if not deadly, for Black males in the 1950s and 60s. Meridian Henry, Richard’s father, faces this conflict as he eulogizes and buries his only child. Since Richard, the Till figure, dies, it remains with Richard’s father to assert a Black masculine identity as he merges two ideologies: those of the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements.

Black men appear emasculated in the face of Southern Christianity and racism. In the play’s introduction, Baldwin says that “the play . . . takes place in Plaguestown, U.S.A.” (7), a good euphemism for 1960s Mississippi. One plague, he says, is “our concept of Christianity” (7). Certainly this plague is evident as white men in the play stop by Lyle’s house on their way to church. The dialogue between the preacher and the congregation clearly reveals that they do not see the humanity of Blacks; they see niggers and refer to Blacks as niggers throughout the play. And they come to support Lyle on the advent of his arrest. Undoubtedly, the men think highly of Lyle and his roles of entrepreneur, drinker, and ladies’ man (68), even though they know that he killed Old Bill, and possibly, Richard Henry. Christian Whitetown refuses to address Blacktown’s issues because they do not see the pulpit “as a forum for irresponsible notions concerning

social equality" (135). A drum major for justice, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in 1963 to Birmingham clergymen who criticized his visit to the city to lead the citizens in non-violent action. In the letter, King reprimands the ministers for the very sentiments expressed by Whitetown in the play. He says:

> In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sidelines and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." (90)

King, the leader or the Civil Rights Movement, grew up in the church and rooted the movement there, a place with a subversive reputation that goes back to slavery, so he concludes that he is needed in Birmingham and that his actions are timely. In a radical text that links revolution and theology, *Black Theology & Black Power*, James H. Cone states profoundly, "The black church was born in slavery" (91). He continues, "The black church became the home base for revolution" (92). For Blacks, sacred and secular matters are inextricably linked. In contrast, whites can separate the spiritual from the material more easily than can Blacks. White piety on Sunday has nothing to do with white prejudice on Monday. King calls this idea an "un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular" (90). Perhaps whites' disconnect of their spiritual and material lives comes from their belief in Leonardo's artistic rendering of the blonde, blue-eyed Jesus. Whites cannot imagine that their God, who looks like them, cares anything for Blacks and their concerns. Even though Blacks were socialized to believe in the white God, during the Black Arts Movement, they began to question the

white God's interest in their cause, and Baldwin includes this new response in the play. One character, Lorenzo, represents the new generation whose ideas on religion and masculinity contrast radically with the older generation represented by Meridian and Mother Henry. Angrily, Lorenzo attempts to enlighten his elders: ". . . here you sit—in this—this—the house of this damn almighty God who don't care what happens to nobody, unless, of course, they're white" (15).

Either Jesus is white or "raceless," but never Black, as Cone explains, "White liberal preference for a raceless Christ serves only to make official and orthodox the centuries-old portrayal of Christ as white" (68). As long as whites are the same color as their God, they do not see where Blacks fit into sharing a life with them in heaven or on earth. Lorenzo also sees that Black masculinity is affected by the institutionalized racism of white Christianity: "Mother Henry, I got a lot of respect for you and all that, and for Meridian, too, but that white man's God is *white*. It's that damn white God that's been lynching us and burning us and castrating us and raping our women and robbing us of everything that makes a man a man for all these hundreds of years" (15). Cone explains Lorenzo's point: "As long as whites can be sure that God is on their side, there is potentially no limit to their violence against anyone who threatens the American racist way of life" (75).

In *Blues*, Meridian Henry, like King, is the leader of the movement and the minister of the church. When the play opens, he directs the students in non-violent action in the face of overt racism, displayed by verbal and physical attacks. The students trade racial and sexual insults as Meridian directs them in the proper response. Meridian believes in the system and Parnell, the supposedly liberal white who owns the

newspapers and who is good friends with the killer, Lyle Britten. Meridian tells his friends and family that “Parnell will help me” (17), as they question the system of justice in the openly racist town. But Parnell has conflicting loyalties, trying to be friends with Meridian, the father of the victim, and the killer, Lyle. Exasperated with Parnell’s wavering, Juanita questions his place, “Where do you live?” (100). Even the white citizens feel the need to know where he stands in the racial conflict, as Rev. Phelps from Whitetown tells him that their “situation down here has become much too serious for flippancy and cynicism” (75). Cone confirms Blacks’ exasperation with the Parnells of the world: “There is no place in this war of liberation for nice white people who want to avoid taking sides and remain friends with both the racists and the Negro” (67). Samuel A. Hay agrees with Cone, “Parnell, along with other white liberals is so useless, Baldwin is saying, that Parnell should be avoided—not to punish him, but to save the African American” (94). Meridian eventually confronts Parnell, telling him that he is “just another white man—after all” (62) and that “[he] must look at [his] record” (63) because he does not like what he sees in this tenuous relationship with Parnell. This white liberal character type appears later in Bebe Moore Campbell’s fiction. The white liberal has the desire to be morally correct but is so mired in Southern tradition that when the opportunity to rise above the racist South presents itself, he remains true to the white race and falls back on the tradition of his forefathers.

As Meridian prepares to preach his son’s funeral, he wants to know if Christianity is responsible for emasculating him and Black men. Meridian is uncertain that Jesus of the twice-turned cheek is an appropriate role model for establishing a Black masculine identity. He says that B. C. Black men did not have to take the low road; they were men.

His pain and internal conflict are palpable as he wrestles with the collective identity in front of Parnell, someone for whom masculine identity is never in question:

> Of course, if you go back far enough, you get to a point *before* Christ, if you see what I mean, *B.C.*—and at that point, I've been thinking, black people weren't raised to turn the other cheek, and in the hope of heaven. No, then they didn't have to take low. Before Christ. They walked around just as good as anybody else, and when they died, they didn't go to heaven, they went to join their ancestors. My son's dead, but he's not gone to join his ancestors. He was a sinner, so he must have gone to hell—if we're going to believe what the Bible says. (56)

Clearly Meridian does not see a good fit for the Black masculine image in Christianity as he questions: "Is that such an improvement, such a mighty advance over B. C.? (56). Like Lorenzo, Meridian also knows that his masculine image, as with other Southern Black males, is dubious and that he has used Christianity to achieve equality: "would I have been such a Christian if I hadn't been born black? Maybe I *had* to become a Christian in order to have any dignity at all. Since I wasn't a man in men's eyes [white men], then I could be a man in the eyes of God" (56). Parnell hears the change in him and says that this is a new sound, but Meridian tells him that the sound is as old as the blues and spirituals (57). This is the blues for Mr. Charlie, the white man who has defined masculinity and denied the application to Black males and who has had his foot on the necks of Blacks since the docking of the first boat.

James Edward Smethurst traces the history of the Black Arts Movement from many Leftist organizations from East to West, North to South, and over many decades.

One such organization is the Communist movement that was popular in the 1950s. This anti-capitalism movement focused on the issues of workers, black and white, and called for them to unite against the rich owner oppressors (132). Communist leaders courted the membership of Blacks, so in the play, Whitetown expresses its fears of a Communist-inspired Blacktown. Arguing that separation is by race, Baldwin rejects the communist theory of class. He clearly identifies racial division in the stage directions: "The isle also functions as the division between WHITETOWN and BLACKTOWN. The action among the blacks takes place on one side of the stage, the action among the whites on the opposite side of the stage—which is to be remembered during the third act, which takes place, of course, in a segregated courtroom" (11). Baldwin further states that other sets "shouldn't be allowed to obliterate the skeleton, or, more accurately, perhaps, the frame-work, suggested above" (12). Therefore, the big division is never to leave the eyes and consciousness of the audience. This aggressive display of racial separation upset white audiences in the Broadway production, which, Amiri Baraka says, is the function of revolutionary theatre: to effect change, to expose, accuse, and attack (1899). According to the biographer who related the drama behind the drama, white audiences were upset at this depiction of themselves. David Lemming reports, "*Blues for Mister Charlie* opened on April 23 to an audience of highly appreciative blacks and sometimes angry and often shocked whites. In essence, Baldwin had achieved the kind of audience and audience/player dialogue he had aimed for" (238). Brian Norman supports Baraka's definition of revolutionary theatre. He writes about Baldwin's use of his literary celebrity to write a polemical play that addresses racial division, integration, and Black Nationalism. He says that in the play Baldwin has the audience face the polarization of

racial segregation so that they may be motivated to make changes in society (79). If Communist theory, which argues that separation is based upon class and wealth, were a viable option for Baldwin, the Brittens and Henrys would have united against the Parnells of the town. But the conversations between the whites clearly show that the people are divided by race, not class. For example, they believe that entering Black students will lower the standards of white schools, and that Black males will rush to copulate with white females, thus linking the murder of Richard with the Supreme Court decision to integrate public schools, *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. Parnell offers classism to Meridian to support Lyle's behavior. "He's a poor white man. The poor whites have been just as victimized in this part of the world as the blacks have ever been!" (60). Not even in an earlier argument does Meridian believe Parnell's insistence on the class division as the town's problem. He says to the rich Parnell about the poor Lyle, "you both have more in common with each other than either of you have with me" (57), and what they have in common are the white race and a tradition of superiority. Because of his long and persistent association with Meridian and Blacktown, Parnell is labeled a communist, and his newspaper, a communist rag; however, despite his religious or social affiliation Lyle expects Parnell to remember that he is "a white man" in order to avoid shaming the white community (154).

Richard Henry, the Emmett-Till character, rejects Christianity and the non-violent Civil Rights Movement. There is no long agonizing internal conflict about Christianity such as his father Meridian has. In fact, there are only two references to his spirituality. The first is very brief as he talks to his grandmother. Richard says that he doesn't fear God because he doesn't believe in God (33). The other reference occurs in Meridian's

B.C. speech when he says that Richard was a sinner and, according to Christian dogma, is therefore going to hell. Richard's rejection of Christianity may be his way of rebelling against his father, but his position is the same as the Black Power movement. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, which was rooted in the church and Christianity, the Black Power movement was rooted in the Left socialist movements, such as Communism, and "a commitment to a generally non-Christian. . . spirituality became a hallmark of the Black Arts movement" (Smethurst 132). Even though the line between the Left and the nationalists was blurred, explains Smethurst, "the new nationalist camp was often severely critical of King, his philosophy of nonviolence, and what it saw as an overwillingness to accommodate himself to Northern liberalism and to restrain the more radical elements of the movement" (124). King warns his fellow ministers about the movement that is so different from his own: "Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement [Black Nationalist] is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible 'devil'" (87). One of those white-man-as-devil converts who often preached Black Nationalism for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, the poster man for Black Power and masculinity, renounces the American white man's Christianity because "America's Negroes—especially older Negroes—are too indelibly soaked in Christianity's double standard of oppression" (*Autobiography* 419). On another occasion, Malcolm signifies on his audience when he refuses to discuss religion. He quips, "put your religion at home, in the closet, keep it between you and your God. Because if it hasn't done anything more for you than it has, you need to forget it anyway" (*By Any Means* 180). According to Norman, Black

militants forced Baldwin to question his commitment to integration, so Baldwin intentionally merges the non-violent and armed resistance dialogues. Norman observes, "Baldwin conjures the deeply polarizing figure of Till in order to join integration goals with calls for armed resistance so that his readers can see how state-sponsored justice and self-determination are not mutually exclusive" (76). Baldwin himself, a child preacher, eventually left the church. He and his step-father questioned the racist Christian's behavior. He said that his father had never forgiven white people for saddling him with a God that they obviously no longer believed in. Reconciling two seemingly conflicting ideologies in his text *Black Theology & Black Power*, Cone says that "it is an expression on man's inhumanity to rebel against God" (149). Mother Henry hints at this concept when she tells Richard that belief in a higher power is not up to him. If he does not believe, however, there is nothing to rebel against.

Moreover, Richard thinks that his father acted unmanly in the death of Richard's mother. Richard "sure as hell wasn't proud of him" (34). He wanted his father to "[take] a pistol and [go] through that damn white man's hotel and [shoot] every son of a bitch in the place" (34). His mother's death was ruled accidental, but Richard thinks that the racists killed her. Because whites claim that his wife slipped in water and fell down the stairs, Meridian does not see a reason to act, but Richard will "never forget the way he looked—whipped, whipped, whipped, whipped!" (35). Richard knows that his father has "no power because he's black. And the only way the black man's going to get any power is to drive all the white men into the sea" (35). Richard explicitly ties race to power. In addition to Meridian, his father, the other black men in the play do no present a masculine

identity for Richard to emulate. Papa D is “kind of a Tom” (40), and Pearl’s father could not do anything to keep a young, hormone-overloaded Parnell from his daughter (89).

Since Black males are not considered to be men and if Richard rejects them as role models, then Richard emulates white males, who define themselves as men in terms of their sexual prowess and violent aggression. Thus, he emulates what he despises in them. Lyle Britten, for instance, values sexual prowess. He compliments Parnell’s virility and sexual skills (28), and he is proud to be like his daddy, “drinking and running after women” (68). Also, Parnell says how proud men were to rape Black women (87). The Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver, begins *Soul on Ice* with his fascination for what he calls the “Ogre,” the white woman (11). He confesses that he began raping white women to punish white men. He “was defiling his women” (14). He says, “I felt I was getting my revenge” (14). Coincidentally, while doing time in Folsom, he reads about the Emmett Till murder and looks at a picture of the attention-starved Carolyn Bryant. Chagrined, he admits, “I looked at the picture again and again, and in spite of everything and against my will and the hate I felt for the woman and all that she represented, she appealed to me” (11). Such is the pull of the white man’s mythic creation that Black males are drawn to her despite the imminent threat to their lives.

By the end of his autobiography, Cleaver has put the racial-sexual tension between the races into sharp focus, which explains Lyle’s behavior. Analyzing the racial, gender, and sexual myths, Cleaver presents an allegory of a class society in which he creates types that explain racism; the white man is the Omnipotent Administrator, the Brain; the Black man is the Supermasculine Menial, the Body; the white woman is “the delicate, weak, helpless Ultrafeminine,” and the Black woman is “the strong, self-reliant

Amazon" (187). Realizing his mistake, that he has "conceded to the Supermasculine Menial all of the attributes of masculinity associated with the Body," including the penis, the Omnipotent Administrator has to change the rules:

> I will have sexual freedom. But I will bind your rod with my omnipotent will, and place a limitation on its aspiration which you will violate on pain of death. . . . I will have access to the white woman and I will have access to the black woman. The black woman will have access to you—but she will also have access to me. I forbid you access to the white woman. (165)

As the Omnipotent Administrator, Lyle is jealous of Richard, the Body. He tells Papa D that he will never "be able to dance like that" (47) because soulful rhythm takes the Body, which he has handed over to The Supermasculine Menial, Richard. Envious of the Body's penis, Lyle must project masculine dominance, so he brags of his conquest of Willa Mae and of loading her "up with things from the kitchen just to make sure they didn't go hungry" (94). With the Brain and the Body (in his mind), he is superior to all Black males. Because he views Willa Mae's husband, Old Bill, as an impotent Body, Lyle, the Omnipotent Administrator, thinks that "it might be a pretty good arrangement—me doing *his* work, ha-ha! because *he* damn sure couldn't do it no more and helping him to stay alive" (94). So Lyle assaults Old Bill's masculine pride in the two areas that men hope to assert it most: the bedroom and the pantry. Yet, Lyle denies the same access to the Body. He defends his stand against integration to Parnell: "I don't want no big buck nigger lying up next to Josephine and that's where all this will lead to and you know it as well as I do! I'm against it and I'll do anything I have to do to stop it, yes I will!" (27). Apparently, anything includes murder.

The need for the Brain to prove that he is as masculine as the Body causes tunnel vision in white males. Right before stepping into church, Ellis has one conversation—sex—and projects his own lascivious views onto Blacktown: "They got one interest. And it's just below the belly button" (71), and preoccupied with the enormous Black penis, Ellis assures the white women that they "wouldn't be no more good for nobody" should they be raped by a nigger, which equates to "an orang-outang out of the jungle or a stallion" (71). As Baldwin says about the Black penis, the size is the color and the color is the size. Malcolm X explains this preoccupation as one of the two dreads of white men: one is God's destruction of the world, and the other is "his image of the black man entering the body of a white woman" (*Autobiography* 306). Also, when the State questions Meridian's sexual activities, Whitetown is lewd in its attraction to the details at the trial. It wants the judge to "make him tell us all about it. *All* about it" (136).

Lyle and his kind are also aggressive in their attacks on Blacktown. Lorenzo wonders why two white men feel safe enough to be in Blacktown at night trying to blow up someone's house in retaliation for the demonstrations. There is also mental assault. Lyle dictates Papa D's testimony about his being the last one to be seen with Richard, and if Papa D thinks that something else occurred, he is wrong. Lyle tells Parnell, "You go back and tell him I said he's got it all confused—about me and that boy. Tell him you talked to me and that I said he must have made some mistake" (29). Lyle talks to Papa D as if he is the overseer and Papa D is an unruly slave: "You don't say the right thing, nigger, I'll blow your brains out, too" (116). This violent, aggressive behavior served white males well in dictating the behavior of the Black community. Similarly armed and threatening, Bryant and Milan felt safe enough and privileged enough to pull Emmet Till

from his uncle's home. Conditioned to kowtowing to white male power and explicit death threats, Uncle Moses let Emmett go, thinking that they would teach him a lesson and bring him back. After testifying against Bryant and Milan, Uncle Moses had to leave town, perhaps fearful of another lesson, but this time directed at him. In the play, Lyle feels free to visit Black clubs (47), and in the beginning of his conflict with Richard, he "jostles Juanita" (48). Just as he thought about Willa Mae's husband, Lyle thinks that he has "never done [Richard] no harm" (96), and can't understand why "he looked at me like he wanted to kill me" (96). However, Richard has learned the lessons of overt sexual expression and violent aggression well from the white males, so he knows Lyle's intentions. In a move to escalate their own worth, white men define Black masculinity, always keeping themselves superior, and prescribe the Black response to their aggression. They tell us what a good Black is: the one who doesn't "act mistreated" and help them to "catch a nigger" (69) and often discuss Blacks like animals: in reference to Richard, "he went bad" (72) and to others, "niggers turned bad" (96).

With the passive and aggressive models of Black and white males, Richard is confused about Black masculine identity, as it is defined by the Black Power movement. He adopts the sex and drugs in his musician's lifestyle. In reverse migration, he moves from North to South to heal from his drug addiction, which was fueled by his hatred of white women. In a drug-induced state, "[he] could handle them, they couldn't reach [him]" (46). In the South, a place that views race-mixing as a communist idea, Richard, like Lyle the lover, wants to promote himself as the virile ladies' man, so he shows pictures of white women and brags that he has "a whole gang of white chicks in New York" (41). He objectifies them and displays them as trophies that make a testament to

his sexual prowess. Baldwin remains faithful to the historical record: Emmett Till showed pictures of his white girlfriends from Chicago. Unlike Till, however, Richard grew up in the South, and, unless he is suffering from naiveté, he knows the consequences for Black males who step across the racial, sexual divide. But he needs to be Lyle's masculine equal. Like Lyle the killer, Richard wants to kill the symbol of the racist power structure (59). Richard believes that white people are "responsible for all the crimes that ever happened in the history of the world" (35). Lyle "jostles Juanita" (48) while she and Richard are dancing, and although Lyle asks for pardon, Richard takes offense and begins a hostile verbal exchange with Lyle. In misguided masculine aggression, Richard wants to go into Lyle's store even though the town is boycotting the store. He wants "to get another look at the peckerwood" (98). Richard tells Lorenzo that he "want[s] to get his face fixed in [his] mind, so there won't be no time wasted when the time comes, you dig?" (98). Once inside, Richard attacks Lyle's virility, "surprised [that Lyle] could even get it up (101). Thus, Richard's views of sexual and masculine aggression are distorted views that he has adopted from Whitetown. In the white male's mind, Richard's behavior is reserved for white men, so Lyle kills Richard because he is "acting white" and tells the audience so in the opening scene of the play: "And may every nigger end like this nigger face down in the weeds" (13).

Lyle has to kill Richard, just like he had to kill Old Bill: they are crazy in Lyle's view. He kills them "to assert a masculinity that the cowardice of racism belies" (Leeming 236). Leeming's point is irrefutable in the historical record of Emmett Till, and, although there is no cause for Till's murder, Baldwin is careful to establish cause for Richard's death to refute Lyle's action as justified. Samuel Hay says that "Baldwin has

him break all rules: Everything that Richard says and does to Lyle pushes toward a showdown" (94). Brian Norman also discusses the reason for an insulting Richard. He says, "Baldwin never presents himself or representative figures like Till as exclusively ethical or divorced from the sins of fellow citizens" (79). Lyle's long-time Tom, Papa D, reclaims his gonads in the courtroom. He says about Richard, "he was wild, but he had good sense" (119). Unlike Meridian, however, Richard does not have a group in which to focus his agenda against white people. Malcolm X surely recognizes this need. A. B. Spellman reports, "[Malcolm] wanted to play an active part in the black struggle, but he knew how difficult that would be without a strong organization through which he could function. . ." (qtd. in X, *By Any Means* 1). Baldwin creates in Richard a lone wolf, operating without a pack, an organization. Lacking focus and an agenda, this wildness that Papa D sees (perhaps a part of, but not the sanctioned definition of Black Power) kills him because, according to Norman, whites see "Richard [as] a gun-toting maniac with no social responsibility" (83). The Black Power movement was not about whipping whitey, mentally or physically, or mating with his woman. According to Stokely Carmichael, Black Power is about the economics of the community, like Lorenzo says in Act I when he decries Blacks' inability to get licenses for skilled jobs. It is not about integrating on the social level; it is about access to the economical and political levels (128-30). Baldwin, however, does not see Black Nationalism as a viable position for Blacks in the structure of American society and does not promote it in *Blues*.

Richard recognizes the end of the line for him. He says to Lyle who has come for an apology that Richard won't give, "I'm ready, Charlie" (120) and follows meekly. Why? We know why Lyle kills Richard, but why does an aggressive Black male with a

kill-whitey mentality go quietly? When Lyle comes for Richard in Papa D's joint, this is not the same Richard who insulted Lyle's manhood in front of Lyle's woman. Cleaver explains a similar quieting when he falls in love with his attorney, Beverly Axelrod, in prison: "when she first comes to him his heart is empty, a desolate place, a dehydrated oasis, unsolaced, and he's craving womanfood, without which sustenance the tension of his manhood has unwound and relaxed" (23). Of course, Cleaver would refute this explanation. In a scathing attack upon Baldwin, he claims that ". . . throughout the range of his work . . . there is a decisive quirk in Baldwin's vision which corresponds to his relationship to black people and to masculinity" (105). Cleaver also says that because "he cannot confront the stud in others" (109), Baldwin "has instead resorted to a despicable underground guerrilla war, waged on paper against black masculinity . . ." (109). Perhaps Cleaver's comments come from the Black Nationalists' focus on asserting a masculine identity, which would not tolerate Baldwin's open homosexuality. On the witness stand, Juanita says that despite her initial attempts to persuade him otherwise, Richard "said he wasn't going to run no more from white folks—never no more!—but was going to stay and be a man—a man!—right here" (131). According to her and Papa D's points of view, Richard has changed his mind about staying in the South and wants to take Juanita with him, but ". . . it was too late. Lyle killed him" (131). Yet, in the final confrontation, Richard has nothing but his bare hands with which to fight Lyle. He has given his gun to Mother Henry with her promise to give it to him when he asks. Richard never asks because just as soon as he decides to leave, Lyle comes for him. Richard finishes his record and his drink, and just as Emmett Till leaves with his killers, Richard leaves with Lyle, never to be seen alive again. At Meridian and Parnell's insistence, Lyle recounts

Richard's final moments as he tries to settle their apology business. Richard says, "It's settled. You a man and I'm a man. Let's walk" (156). In a final burst of bravado, staring down the barrel of Lyle's gun, Richard insults the white man's lack of connection to his body. Hay sees this scene as evidence of Baldwin's originality, not just a presenter of old protest ideas, in that it is a call to all African Americans, not just the males. Hay says that African Americans need to back up their bluffs and fight their battles (93-94). He concludes, Baldwin's "point is that Lyle's murder is Richard's suicide. By not being prepared 'to back up his talk,' Richard—and African Americans—enticed death" (94). After acquittal, Lyle explains to Meridian and Parnell that, being a white man, he could not let Richard talk to him that way. Lyle claims that he gave him every chance, but Richard refused to apologize, and in a racist society where Lyle is the superior male, he has to protect his social position against any unarmed Black male who tries to assert a masculine identity.

According to Cleaver's allegory, Lyle becomes superior in thought, if not in reality: Lyle values his Brain and denies this intelligence to Richard, the Body. In separating the Brain from the Body, Lyle, the white man, realizes his mistake: the penis, "the essence and seat of masculinity," goes with the Body, so Lyle envies the Black penis and will do all that he can to destroy the Black man and emasculate him (165). In defining an aesthetic for the Black Arts Movement, co-founder Larry Neal says that the artist must not separate himself from his community. Thus, the Black artist's community has a Black audience. In explaining Richard's death, Neal says in 1966 that Baldwin, however, directs his writings to white people, "[joining] the tradition of pleading with white America for the humanity of the Negro" (59). Thus, by killing Richard, Baldwin

appeases his integrated audience. White people cannot live comfortably with a Richard, so he has to die because of Baldwin's ideology. Baldwin does not see an American future with the separatist position of Black Nationalism.

The conflict between Richard and Meridian symbolizes the generational conflict between the elders (non-violent resistance) and the youth (armed self-defense), but Baldwin clearly favors the fervor of youth, tempered with the wisdom of the elders. Thus, Meridian becomes the image of the Black Power movement with his ideology of self-assertion and armed self-defense, while maintaining his Christian beliefs. In Act I, Meridian begins to question his religious commitment with his BC speech, which is a powerful testament to the conflict in Black masculinity. As it faces a transformed Meridian on the witness stand, Blacktown confesses that it wondered about Meridian and that "turn-the-other-cheek jazz. His son sure didn't go for it" (133). Whites, however, do not see the generational conflict between Richard and Meridian. They treat the Black community as monolithic, as if Meridian and Richard share the same viewpoints. Norman explains further, "Meridian, however, recognizes the limits of both the integration and Black Nationalist projects and seeks to bridge nonviolence and militancy" (82). Parnell thinks that Meridian sounds more and more like the dead Richard who "said right out loud, for all the world to hear, how much he despised white people!" (59). How Richard feels about white people is not Meridian's concern, however. He tells Parnell that as "a black man, with a black son, you have to forget all bout white people and concentrate on trying to save your child" (59). In trying to "save" young Richard, Meridian loses him and sacrifices his masculine identity in the process. In his eulogy for Richard, he begins to reclaim it. Unlike Richard, however, Meridian does not look to Whitetown for

examples of manhood: “What hope is there for a people who deny their deeds and disown their kinsmen and who do so in the name of purity and love, in the name of Jesus Christ?” (105). Unlike the Black Nationalists that King warns about, Meridian does not repudiate God or Christianity. He says that he will wrestle with God until he gets a sign and asks that “God teach us to trust the great gift of life and learn to love one another and dare to walk the earth *like men* [emphasis added]” (105-06). Seeing the decaying examples in Whitetown, Meridian wants to transcend whites; he does not want to emulate them because they are not the role models for Black masculine identity. He knows that Blacks have to define masculinity and determine and direct their own path. In trying to define a movement, Baldwin obviously promotes Meridian’s concept as Black Power. It is not Richard’s way of foolish, suicidal aggression. It is not “[integrating] into a burning house” (Baldwin, *Fire* 94). It is about destroying that house and building a new one, but with love. It is about economic, political, and social power in the Black community, and it is about developing, not abandoning, the Black community (Carmichael 131).

Another significant idea behind the Black Power definition of masculinity is armed self-defense. Still following the path of non-violent resistance, Meridian begins to waffle. He questions his decision not to let his followers arm themselves (55). But Parnell assures him that Blacks will be slaughtered. Ironically, the question of arms arises in the midst of non-violent Blacks and violent whites. It seems that whites are free to commit violence while Blacks are urged toward a non-violent position. White men are free to wage war in Blacktown. According to Lorenzo, the voice of indignant outrage in the play, Blacks will have to “fall on their knees and use their Bibles as breast-plates” since Bibles are certainly more plentiful in the Black community than guns (51). In the face of

violence, non-violence seems an ineffective strategy. Malcolm X thought so. When the white press attacks Malcolm for his stance on self-defense, he signifies directly on King: "Well, I believe it's a crime for anyone who is being brutalized to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend himself. If that's how 'Christian' philosophy is interpreted, if that's what Gandhian philosophy teaches, then, I will call them criminal philosophies" (*Autobiography* 422). A. B. Spellman questions Malcolm about Gandhi and Christianity in an interview, and Malcolm responds, "I don't go for anything that's non-violent and turn-the-other-cheekish" (X, *By Any Means* 8-9). In the same interview he says that "we [his organization] are nonviolent only with nonviolent people. I'm nonviolent as long as somebody else is nonviolent—as soon as they get violent they nullify my nonviolence" (9-10). In response to a reporter's question about the 1964 violence in Harlem, Malcolm rebukes America for its double standard. "When whites had rifles in their homes, the Constitution gave them the right to protect their homes and themselves. But when black people even spoke of having rifles in their homes, that was 'ominous'" (*Autobiography* 415).

Malcolm is very clear about his position on armed self-defense, which is probably why so many poems in *Black Fire,* an anthology that includes works from many of the period's major artists, refer to him as the man who defined masculinity for the Black Arts Movement. In some short statements, Malcolm explains what "they" [the white people] mean by violence: "By violence they only mean when a black man protects himself" (*By Any Means* 176). In *African American Theatre,* Samuel A. Hay traces the history of theatre and offers a critical analysis of Baldwin's play. He believes that the form is protest and that the characters are stereotypical. He quotes Calvin C. Hernton's thesis that

racism is a result of sexual conflicts; however, Hay believes that Baldwin's talent would prevent him from rehashing an old theme (93). Hay says that Baldwin's point is the "introduction of Malcolm X's early revolutionary philosophy to African American theatre" (94). In his argument for an armed revolution, Cone also comments on the irony of non-violent resistance: "It is interesting that so many advocates of nonviolence as the only possible Christian response of black people to white domination are also the most ardent defenders of the right of the police to put down black rebellion through violence" (139). Even King condemns the violent Birmingham police officers with their water hoses and attack dogs. Christopher Metress edited several critical essays on various literary expressions of Till's murder and notes the creative license that Baldwin takes in *Blues*: "In fact, we can read the many liberties that Baldwin has taken with the details of the Till case as intended to produce a similar kind of unsettling [like the one experienced by white characters], and one of the main ideas that Baldwin wants to unsettle is the notion that nonviolent Christian love is the best way to respond to racial violence" (21). In the play, the characters surely seem to be on the losing end of the nonviolent strategy. Pete is reduced to puerile stuttering, and Ruthie will not swing again. But the most powerful effect on the nonviolent conflict occurs with Meridian as he preaches his son's funeral and contemplates the sin that Biblical Blacks committed that still requires God's punishment for that sin. Uncertain of his leadership, Meridian prays for manhood. At the trial, his prayers are answered: "I am a man. A *man*! I tried to help my son become a man. But manhood is a dangerous pursuit, here" (136).

The symbol of the Bible and the gun seems to point him in the right direction for manhood. When Parnell asks Meridian about the gun, Meridian says that he has it "in the

pulpit. Under the Bible. Like the pilgrims of old" (158). Whites began colonization and enslavement of Africans in this manner; "maybe it [racism] will end with the Bible and the gun" (157). With a bit of hero-worship, Malcolm agrees, "I read about the slave preacher Nat Turner, who put the fear of God into the white slavemaster. Nat Turner wasn't going around preaching pie-in-the-sky and 'non-violent' freedom for the black man" (*Autobiography* 203). In contrast, Neal does not see the Bible-gun symbolism as positive: "It was if the author cannot decide what exactly he wants his character to do or to be. And it is this duality that is finally the most disconcerting thing about much of Baldwin's work, even the best of it" (59). Norman agrees with the concept of bringing the two movements together. He says, "Meridian, however, recognizes the limits of both the integration and Black Nationalist projects and seeks to bridge nonviolence and militancy" (82).

Of course, Christians will point to an appropriate scripture, such as "Thou shalt not kill," to argue against violence. To advocate violent revolution in the midst of the New Testament Christian love does appear contradictory, but Cone explains the contradiction by answering the popular cliché "What would Jesus do?" He says, "We cannot solve ethical questions of the twentieth century by looking at what Jesus did in the first. Our choices are not the same as his" (139). So instead of Christians asking what Jesus *did*, we should ask what he would *do now*. In debating their conflicts, says Cone, Blacks must realize that there is no "absolute ethical guide from Jesus" (140). Since violence is a part of the racist system, "the Christian does not decide between violence and nonviolence, evil and good. He decides between the less and the greater evil. He must ponder whether revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary" (143). Too,

the plays, poems, and stories of the Black Arts Movement reject the Jesus that many artists grew up with. Instead, they embrace the law of retaliation of the Old Testament God, an eye for an eye. Norman says, "But the figure of the Christian preacher was losing currency with a younger generation, and Baldwin addresses this tension in his protest essay and later in *Blues*" (78). This new, gun-toting, Christian Meridian will not look for a fight, like Richard, but he will not back down from one either, like Richard.

The Black Arts Movement was a radical change from any prior movement in that it was a separatist movement rather than an integrationist movement. The artists rejected Western ideas of poetry, fiction, and drama by producing poems with one line or no European poetic elements, drama with no dialogue, and fiction with no plot or characters. Black dramas put the plight of Black Americans on view for interracial audiences, who viewed the same play with contradictory reactions. For instance, in Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, Blacks found the premise of a disappearing Black population and its effects hilarious, while whites wondered what was so funny. Baldwin's play drew similar mixed reactions. BAM artists wrote celebratory pieces for their heroes and ancestors. They celebrated the activists and the artists, musical and literary. The founders and artists also constructed a Black masculine identity (armed self-defense) with Malcolm X as the embodiment of the definition so that Emmett Till could be the last Emmett Till. This man could not be effeminate, nor willingly suffer an assault by racist whites; therefore, the followers rejected King, Jesus, and certainly the religion that bears his name, Christianity. The revolutionaries questioned Jesus' loyalties. Did He support the white cause of segregation or the Black cause for equal opportunity? He could not embrace both because both were not right. So Baldwin's Meridian is trying to hold on to

his New Testament love in the face of soul-crushing brutality. His grip becomes tenuous with the murder of his son, who is trying to begin anew in the racist South. Clearly with such overt internal conflict as Meridian displays, Baldwin does not support Meridian's initial position. Richard's radical separatist stance is not possible either, according to Baldwin. Nor is his idea of manhood. He is spirituality bankrupt, and he fails to assert his masculine identity (armed self-defense) when he needs it most. Baldwin kills the character. Baldwin rejects both the gender-neutral identity of Meridian and the hyper-masculine identity of Richard and embraces the Meridian who emerges as both spiritual and worldly, with the Bible and the gun, two images, according to Leeming, that always made the Blacks in the audience cheer (237). Norman agrees. He says that Baldwin reconciles these conflicting images:

> In Baldwin's play, integration and Black Power coexist. Richard adopts postures associated with doctrines of self-determination (militancy, youthful defiance, seeking confrontation with Whitetown) and Meridian espouses views associated with integration (nonviolence, faithful meditation, interracial camaraderie), but the two characters congregate in a play protesting racial segregation. Whereas Whitetown depicts Richard as out of control and dangerous, Richard is central to Meridian's conversion to a real minister by play's end. (88)

Despite Neal's claim that "Baldwin usually ends up begging out, or by falling back on a kind of supernormal kind of 'love'" (59), undoubtedly for Baldwin, an armed Christian revolutionary is the future of the movement that began with the death of Emmett Till.

CHAPTER 2

Poetry

Five major poets give extended attention to the Emmett Till murder in their art: Gwendolyn Brooks, Wanda Coleman, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and Langston Hughes. Brooks, Coleman, and Lorde each devote one long narrative poem to Till, but Giovanni devotes several narrative poems to Till that imagine his life, complete with grandchildren. The themes vary from Black masculine identity to Black men as sexual predators to white violence and the Black response, sometimes all in one poem. Though not as frequently anthologized, Hughes' poems denounce Mississippi as place and celebrate the blues, one of Hughes' favorite folk forms. Several other poets also pay tribute to Till, including Barack Obama's inaugural poet, Elizabeth Alexander.

She never calls his name. In fact, Gwendolyn Brooks' 1960 narrative poem "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" is from the white woman's point of view. The Bronzeville Mother is Mamie Till, who has no starring role in the poem, except in the murderer's and his wife's consciousness. A local Chicago neighborhood, Bronzeville, is a frequent setting in many of Brooks' poems. Brooks does not idolize the white woman, nor grant her a pass as undeserving of public scrutiny for crimes against humanity. Many texts treat Southern white males as the sole perpetrators of violence against blacks, but fail to realize that these men were not raised or operating in social isolation. They were raised by women, who were seeking "fun" (25); they had wives, sisters, and aunts, who could not be so blithely unaware of the violence that their men committed, sometimes in the women's name, providing a powerful boost in self-worth for women who felt devalued. Some

sociologists and historians have placed them at the site of violence, along with their children. Brooks' poem traces a white woman's consciousness from blissful delusion to painful awareness of her husband's character, and her own. Basking in her new sense of self-worth, the Mississippi mother is cooking breakfast for her two children and her husband. While doing such a routine task, she weaves a romance worthy of Camelot, imagining herself as "the milk-white maid, the 'maid mild'" (line 6) of her invented fairy tale, her husband as "the Fine Prince" (8), and Emmett Till as "the Dark Villain" (8). Realistically, she knows her husband's deed, but she tries to get "fun" (25) from it by putting it in a ballad, an art form that "she had never quite / Understood . . . in school" (4-5). The details of the Till murder unfold in the fourth stanza, as her romantic fairy tale begins to disintegrate in tension with realism: ". . . But there was a something about the matter of the Dark Villain. / He should have been older, perhaps" (8-9). In *Sex and Racism in America*, tracing the relationship to slavery, sociologist Calvin C. Hernton says in his thesis "that all race relations tend to be, however subtle, sex relations" (6). Because sex pervades our lives in media, Hernton sees it as pervasive in our racist society, dictating our social interactions. In his 1992 text, he begins with Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 study which was published in *An American Dilemma*. When Myrdal asked Southern whites what Negroes wanted, they ranked sex and marriage with whites as number one of six choices. Negroes ranked the same question as number six of six. Of interest is Earl Ofari Hutchinson's more recent report that "a 1991 poll by the National research Center of 1,500 Americans found that 66 percent of whites opposed a close relation marrying a black man" (156). The nearly 50-year time span does not reveal much progress in race and sex relations. Hernton discusses some of our main issues: the Black males' dilemma

of being surrounded by the white woman as sexual goddess and not being allowed to touch her and the white man as policing the behavior of Black males toward white women but using the Black woman as his personal sex toy. Hernton says that sexual freedom must accompany social and political freedom. He also explains the white woman's romantic notions: "Unable to experience the black man in fact, the Negro in fantasy becomes the center of the white woman's sexual life—she elevates him to the status of a god-phallus; she worships, fears, desires, and hates him" (25). So Milk-white Maid weaves a fantasy around her Black assailant. Since the "little foe" (43), the Till figure, is 14-years-old, however, the Milk-white Maid does not have a *man* to act in her ballad, a fact that slowly enters her consciousness when she characterizes the "Dark Villain" in the next stanza:

> The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified
> When the Dark Villain was a blackish child
> Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty,
> And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder
> Of its infant softness. (25-29)

In lore, the villain is certainly a grown man, with a history of wreaking havoc and causing mayhem. The Mississippi mother recalls her childhood fairy tales:

> The hacking down of a villain was more fun to think about
> When his menace possessed undisputed breadth, undisputed height,
> And a harsh kind of vice.
> And best of all, when his history was cluttered
> With the bones of many eaten knights and princesses. (20-24)

The villain in the ubiquitous fairy tales is always clearly evil and deserves his fate. No reader is sorry to see him go. Many cheer. But Mississippi Mother cannot remove the evil villain and insert Till here. When she tries, the reality of his youth disturbs her. She exclaims, “that boy must have been surprised!” (30). The more complete her ballad, the more she sees that adults’ attacking a child is clearly an uneven and immoral contest:

> It occurred to her that there may have been something
> Ridiculous in the picture of the Fine Prince
> Rushing (rich with the breadth and height and
> Mature solidness whose lack, in the Dark Villain, was impressing her,
> Confronting her more and more as this first day after the trial
> And acquittal wore on) rushing
> With his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)
> That little foe (36-43)

Contrasting her husband’s and his accomplice’s physiques to the Till figure reveals to her the unevenness of the fight. She even finds the image “ridiculous” (37). The Mississippi mother’s complicity in Till’s death is chilling, as she tries to recall his crime against her: “So much had happened, she could not remember now what that foe had done / Against her, or if anything had been done” (44-45). Vivian M. May also argues that the white woman shares guilt: “Brooks underscores how, rather than being a passive observer or unwilling participant in the murderous white supremacist narrative of chivalry, adventure, and marriage that led to Till’s murder, the Carolyn Bryant character is an active accomplice, even if she refuses to acknowledge her agency in this regard” (98-99). The fantasy disintegrates; Milk-white Maid cannot weave it to include “that little foe” (43)

because there is “no thread capable of the necessary / Sew work” (50-51). Recognizing how “the milk-white maid” (6) is socialized, Hernton explains the disturbed mental state of southern white women: “The southern white woman, reared and nurtured in the tradition of ‘sacred white womanhood,’ has had to deny and purge herself of every honest and authentic female emotion that is vital to being a healthy woman” (13). Hernton is talking about the southern white woman’s sexuality, which the white male has restricted to procreation. Her husband, the Fine Prince, joins her and the children for breakfast, clearly disturbed about the media images portraying him and his partner in crime as barbaric beasts (69). Ida B. Wells, the 19th century Memphis newswoman, says that white men refuse to identify themselves with this image: “To justify their own barbarism they assume a chivalry which they do not possess” (801). Wells knows that white men were not chivalrous because they did not extend their chivalry to Black women or Northern white women who came South as teachers and missionaries after the Civil War (801).

In addition to lacking chivalry, the Fine Prince is violent. He wants to “kill them all” (73), including “that snappy-eyed mother,” Mamie Till, the Bronzeville Mother who is loitering in Mississippi (76). He is self-righteous in his indignation of the Northern newspapers’ portrayal of his state. He assures himself,

> Nothing could stop Mississippi.
>
> He knew that. Big Fella
>
> Knew that.
>
> And what was so good, Mississippi knew that.
>
> Nothing and nothing could stop Mississippi. (78-82)

These aggressive thoughts link Big Fella's murder to the integration of public schools and the advent of the Civil Rights Movement. He makes this clear in his next lines: "They could send in their petitions, and scar / Their newspapers with bleeding headlines. Their governors/could appeal to Washington . . ." (83-85). One item of note is that he does not subscribe to the fairy tale; Brooks' diction reveals that his reaction is a purely southern white male impulse. May also indicts Mississippi, as place: "In other words, he knew all along that the state would reward him, or at least not punish him, for murdering Till. Like the ballad, the law has been structured with him in mind" (100). For a minor infraction of the law, "The Fine Prince leaned across the table and slapped / The small and smiling criminal" (90-91). Brooks' imagery of child abuse counters the image that Murray Kempton, a New York reporter, details in an article "The Baby Sitter," in which he describes the "nursery school" (53) and the "violated dove" (55). In an article dripping with irony, Kempton describes the staged setting:

> Meanwhile, in the nursery-courtroom:
>
> J. W. Milam let little Billy wriggle on his lap and little Billy would yip and J. W. would bow his head and shoosh little Billy.
>
> Little Billy would still yip and the prosecuting attorney would continue trying to pick a jury and J. W. would take his hamlike hand and adjust little Billy's celluloid bowtie and no one present doubted that J. W. loved little boys, especially if they were white ones and of the family. (54)

Brooks' fictional character may seethe in anger, but the people in the Sumner, Mississippi, courtroom, especially the jury, could not because of the staged setting. Kempton reports, "Every time a stranger looked at J. W. Milam and wanted to hate him,

there was always a little boy in the line of vision" (54). After her husband's assault upon her child, the Milk-white Maid begins to see "blood" (95) and "red" (98, 123-24). After all, she knows that the Fine Prince is capable of physical abuse. He has killed one child: "that/was one of the new Somethings-- / The fear" (106-07). Milk-white Maid's fear comes early in the poem. When she burns the bacon, she hides the physical evidence, alluding to domestic violence in the castle. Again May reads differently. She looks at what she calls "a key mode of black feminist inquiry" (99), an apposite narrative technique that allows critical analysis of race and gender simultaneously. People are taught racism. It is a social construct, a part of one's upbringing that is supported by society, which May defines as "to see the world wrongly" (100). Instead of the woman's fear of being punished, May sees the cover up of the burned bacon as the Milk-white Maid's playing the role of perfection: "Similarly, by capitalizing 'Him,' Brooks suggests that the Mississippi mother still respects her man as if he were God. By ascribing total power to 'Him,' she can better deny her own role as a participant in the murder" (106). After the Fine Prince assaults her child, however, she feels empathy for the Bronzeville Mother, Mamie Till, only the second mention of her in the poem. Brooks' womanist text has the Milk-white Maid switch from avenged lover to protective mother as she identifies with the Other, Till's mother, who haunts her thoughts. She must feel a little bit of what Bronzeville mother feels. If she reacts in this manner about a slap, a murder would surely bring the "Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman's eyes" (130). Just as Mamie Till is impotent in her rage against the Fine Prince, so too is the Milk-white Maid. Her children fret over their father's assault, and "she, their mother, could not protect them" (111-12). This inability to protect surely must have made Milk-White Maid

recognize another mother's predicament. While she does see Milk-White Maid's identification with Till's mother, Laura Dawkins thinks that "the mother implicitly links her own destiny as the killer's wife . . . to Till's fate as a bound, doomed captive" (115).

Brooks' poetic diction connects sex and violence as the Fine Prince whispers his sexual promises to Milk-white Maid, but "a hatred for him burst into glorious flower" (133). This hatred supplants the image of "all magnolias" (135), a very potent symbol of southern white women. A similar blooming occurs in another Brooks' poem. In "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," she says, "The time / cracks into furious flower" ((20-21), a poem in which the speaker "urge[s the listeners] toward a liberating identity" (Gabbin xvii). Certainly the character begins to slough off the fairy-tale role as she moves toward a new consciousness. Her new emotions are opposite to the imagined love that she was entertaining herself with in the beginning. May does not see anything as feminist/womanist or as motherly identification in Milk-white Maid's reactions: "Brooks suggests that hatred alone is not enough: there must be outrage, action, and accountability, on an individual and collective level, for real change to occur, not tentative, pallid critiques, silent hatred, and guilty self-pity" (107). Citing the bond of the mothers, even in the title of the poem, Dawkins analyzes the ambiguity in who, exactly, is bursting into flower. This ambiguity of Brooks', says Dawkins, "underscores that Till's mother and the mother of Roy Bryant's own children are victims of this man's brutality" (117). The flower image "implicitly encompasses the two women, constructing an empathic bond founded upon a fierce maternal passion" (117). The Milk-white Maid's fear of her husband is real, whereas her fear of Till is imagined. Brooks constructs real and imagined fear for a woman who has been socialized on romantic treacle and who is

sentenced to a life of domesticity. “It was in this way,” says Hernton, “out of the sheer necessity for sexual release and expression, that the southern white woman fixed her fantasies upon the most feared sexual symbol of her times—the black man. Her preoccupation with rape was (and is) not only a grotesque fantasy, but also an accurate index of her sexual deprivation” (17).

The construction of the entire fairy tale shows how the Black male identity is under attack by white society. The tale would become a beautiful ballad for the Milk-white Maid’s life if only the attacker had not been pubescent. In her romance, however, he is the right color, and being “milk-white,” in her mind, she is a prize worth having. She keeps herself attractive and does not want her husband to feel that she was unworthy of his noble deed. She thinks, “He must never conclude / That she had not been worth it” (62-63). Hernton says that the creation of myths have a deadly effect on Black males: “the southern white woman remains a victimized product of her culture, with nobody on whom to avenge her sexual rage except the socially accepted scapegoat, the black man” (19). Perhaps Till thought Milk-white Maid worthy. His budding sexuality expresses itself in attentive appreciation. However, according to southern mythology, this Black bestiality must be eradicated, even in a 14-year-old. White womanhood and the chivalrous way of life in Mississippi must be protected against outsiders. May says that Brooks does not focus on Till’s “crime” because “She ascribes predatory brutality, in terms of sexual and killing desire, to the Roy Bryant character” (108). Because of the need of southern white males to create a myth in order to mitigate their lust for Black women and to justify their treatment of six million slaves, Hernton says, “Sacred white womanhood emerged in the South as an immaculate mythology to glorify an otherwise

indecent society" (14). Using the statistics gathered from white sources, Wells, however, cautions the South about the need to advance this mythology when such a small percentage of lynched Black men were even charged with rape. She warns, "If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women" (800). Brooks ends the poem with "The last quatrain" (138), which is partly the title of another 1960 poem, "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," a ten-line lyrical poem that seems to connect it to "A Bronzeville Mother." In "The Last Quatrain," Brooks names Emmett Till, but humanizes his mother's pain. She is alone in her grief, sitting, "drinking black coffee" (6), surrounded by pictures of Till (Fig. 2). "She kisses her dead boy. / And she is sorry" (7-8). Readers can only guess at the source of her sorrow, a mother's eternal guilt for not measuring up to the ideal image of motherhood or for what the world did to her boy.

In an interview with Tony Magistrale and Patricia Ferreira, Wanda Coleman explains, "As a writer I feel I best serve my readership when I rehumanize the dehumanized, when I illuminate what is in darkness, when I give blood and bone to statistics that are too easily dismissed' (497). To achieve this rehumanization, unlike Gwen Brooks, Coleman calls his name; she writes a poem in 1986 entitled "Emmett Till" for the boy who became a statistic in 1955 Mississippi, a place that led the nation in lynching (Curry 26). Coleman's poem is an elegy in four parts, three of which have refrains that contain italicized alphabetical listings of the nations' rivers, beginning with the Alabama and ending with the Yellowstone. The Tallahatchie, into which J. W. Milan and Roy Bryant threw Till's body, is not in the alphabetical refrain. It is the only named

river in the fourth part. In her interview, Coleman says about literature that "the only major untouched area that is left is American racism" (Magistrale and Ferreira 496), so she illuminates time and place, a racist South, where such an outrage can occur.

The narrator tells of the racism early in the poem with her imagery of blackness linked with poverty resulting from a separate but equal status: "blackness seeps in seeps down/the mortal gravity of hate-inspired poverty / Jim Crow nidus" (lines 4-6). The media voice, one of four in the poem, announces the event: "killing of 14-year old / stirs nation. There will be a public wake" (9-10). But the details do not come until part two and are introduced by "the flint" (32), a river, but also a tool for generating a spark:

> that hazel eye sees
>
> the woman
>
> she fine mighty fine
>
> she set the sun arising in his thighs (33-36)

The Black voice provides one historical detail from Mamie Till's identification of her son's body: he had one hazel eye hanging from its socket, so the black voice says eye, not eyes (Curry 26). He is male; she is female. Attracted, he makes his move: "and he let go a whistle / a smooth long all-american hallelujah whistle / appreciation. A boy" (38-40). As would any boy in America coming into his sexuality, he all but shouts. The last two words in line 40 again emphasize that Till is a boy, a fact that finally bothered the Milk-white Maid in Brooks' poem. In *High Priestess of Word*, a spoken word CD, Coleman embellishes this section to make sure that listeners know what is on Till's mind, if not now, certainly when he grows up. She preaches, "A boy coming into his manhood whistle. A ma'am what I'd like to do someday to some woman look as good as you do to

me whistle." The dialectic of sex and race is linked by the black voice who understands the gravity of Till's whistle: "but she be a white woman. But he be / a black boy" (42-43). Apparently, Maurice White, one of Till's cousins who had accompanied him to the store, did not understand the taboo of sexual expression between black men and white women because, according to one account, he told Bryant about Emmett's transgression, embellishing it quite a bit (Curry 27). This historical figure is characterized as a Tom in fiction and in drama. Hernton explains white irrationality: "Neither the racist system in the South nor the white man's conscience can bear the open knowledge of a black man and a white woman being intimate" (23), so white men are swift to react as an alleged whistle becomes rape:

> they awakened him from sleep
>
> that early fall morning
>
> they made him dress
>
> they hurried Emmett down to the water's edge (57-61)

Again, on CD, Coleman amplifies the racial imagery in her details of the kidnapping and murder. For example, Till was "scared white." Coleman creates memorable poetry from historical facts, continuing in the rhythm of a Black sermon:

> after the deed
>
> they weighed him down
>
> tossed him in
>
> for his violation (63-67)

Many historical accounts say that Milan and Bryant, Coleman's they, went to Till's Uncle Moses' house, carried Till away to a barn, and tortured him for half a day. Then

they wrapped barbed wire around his neck, weighted him down with a cotton gin fan, and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River. Coleman explains the white insanity precipitating the murder:

> a lesson
>
> he had to be taught—crucified (all a nigger
>
> got on his mind) for rape by eye that
>
> wafer-round hazel offender plucked out
>
> they crowned him
>
> . . .
>
> cuz she was a white woman virtue and he
>
> be a black boy lust (75-82)

"Because of the informal taboos and official sanctions against race mixing," says Hernton, "the black man in the South cannot express his desire for a white woman in any way whatever . . . nine chances out of ten it would mean the black man's death" (20). Till is accused, convicted, and executed for "raping her," not with his penis, but "with that hazel eye" (46), which brings the poem back to the beginning of Till's attraction, expressed by his eyeing of Carolyn Bryant. Till and the white woman function as symbols of racial conflict. Till, a potent symbol of emerging Black male sexuality, is denied full realization into manhood. The history of Black men and white women saturates this specific instance with the burden of racial attitudes about sex. In his examination of the creation of Black male images, Earl Ofari Hutchinson says that between 1930 and 1981, 405 of the 455 men executed for rape were Black: "they were put to death on the flimsiest evidence, mostly the word of a white woman. It was nice and

legal then, and it still is today" (73). Sociologist Hernton collected statistics, as well as anecdotes that exemplify the ethos of the time. One incident involved a black man and white woman walking in the opposite direction on opposite sides of the street. She screamed that he attacked her, and when the official pointed out her lack of logic based upon their locations, she said that the black man looked like he wanted to attack her. The incident is humorous in its harmlessness, but the humor forsakes us when we read that the man was arrested, tried, found guilty, and jailed (26).

Two institutions that have long been part of the racial discourse are American Christianity and patriotism. These images, along with the ones of water, function on multiple levels, which Coleman admits is part of her craft (Magistrale and Feireira 497). The waters are simultaneously nurturing and destructive, majestic and humble. The poem begins with "river Jordan run red," a river in central Utah, but also a Biblical river that was a place of bloody conflicts in the Old Testament, like the external conflict of Southern racism that spills the blood of Black males to mingle in the various rivers of the nation. The waters are "sanctified" (13), and "sweetwater culls into its soulplain" (87). Also, "river mother carries him" (98) and is charged with a sacred duty to "come forth to carry the dead child home" (88), both in the sacred and the secular senses. Yet the water also has the ability to "wear away rock / flesh" (17-18). The water imagery complements the religious imagery. Till's mother is "the black Madonna bereft of babe" (31). The "silt hallows the slow sojourn seaward" (57) after, Christ-like, Till is "crucified" (76), "crowned" (79), and "baptized" (109), and "on that third day / he rose" (114-15). Mamie Till's interview reveals how she grieved, questioning God's purpose in taking her only child. She says, "And in one of those question sessions, the Lord showed me, revealed to

me, the way he [Bo] looked was the personification of race hatred" (Curry 32). She told reporters that God had revealed to her that Emmett was not hers, just on loan, and that he was here to serve a higher purpose (32). That purpose was to ignite the movement that ended segregation. So Coleman's religious imagery of a savior supports Mamie Till's vision of her dead son as a Christ-figure and Mamie Till as Mary who had to see him sacrificed to the cause of human rights.

The irony of religious imagery in a poem about a condoned assassination is compounded by Coleman's ironic patriotic imagery of phrases and lines from the national anthem. She begins with "amber field, purple mountains" (19). Till is an "all-american boy" (39-40) who reacts to the opposite sex. Using the words of our national anthem, the narrator questions our ability to see men dredging: "oh say do you see the men off / the bank dredging in that / strange jetsam" (71-73). She questions again, "oh say Emmett Till can you see Emmett Till" (84). On the CD, Coleman sings these lines, along with "Wade in the Water," a Negro spiritual, in the fourth part of the poem, providing a richer experience for the audience. Another instance of the Black oral tradition occurs in the sermon, with a call and response pattern between the preacher and the congregation:

> autumn 1955, lord!
> kidnapped from his family visit
> lord!
> money road shanty
> lord!
> his face smashed in

lord! lord!

his body beaten beyond cognition (90-97)

The preacher merely repeats the details of the murder and filled with pathos at such a brutal response to a child's play, the congregation can only affirm with the one word, lord. The sermon also shows the Black tradition of incorporating the secular with the sacred. The church was a place for discussing and taking care of the worldly needs of the congregation. In crafting multiple levels of meaning, Coleman uses the word cognition, not recognition, because not only was Till beaten until he was unrecognizable, but also beaten beyond the public's ability to mentally process the actions. With the patriotic propaganda, Coleman continues the functional art concept of her literary ancestors. Beginning with slavery and continuing with each successive human rights movement, African Americans have addressed the conflict of oppression in a free, religious society. They have reminded society that American practice does not live up to American ideals, and Coleman's imagery reinforces these conflicts. About the claim to be Christian, law-abiding citizens, Wells says that eyewitness accounts reveal the brutality of the white race who burned flesh, gouged out eyes, hacked off body parts, shot into the hanging bodies, drank beer, and brought their children to the festivities (816). In 1967, James H. Cone addresses the conflict between Christianity and Black Power and how racism can persist: "White Americans do not dare to know that blacks are beaten at will by policemen as a means of protecting the latter's ego superiority as well as that of the larger white middle class. For to know is to be responsible" (25). Over a hundred years later than Wells account, Myisha Priest theorizes that white people used the lynched Black body as text as she explicates Hughes' poem, but her point is appropriate here:

> Until the Emmett Till case, newspaper reports like this one routinely described lynchings, including grisly details of the victim's pained utterances, the means and duration of the attacks, the variety and gruesomeness of the injuries, the location(s) of the victim(s) display, and the number, ages, and genders of witness-participants. (53-54)

Images are the subject of Audre Lorde's 1981 poem "Afterimages." She says, "However the image enters / its force remains within" (1-2). Although Lorde defines the concept in the first two lines and repeats it in lines 10 and 12, a formal definition provides clarity. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines afterimage as "A visual image that persists after a visual stimulus ceases." The stimuli for the afterimages are a white woman who has suffered material loss in a flood and a murdered black boy. Neither is identified in part one of the long narrative poem, which is written in free verse, with little attention to punctuation and capitalization. In Part I, the eyes and their function in retaining images are the focal points: "my eyes are always hungry / and remembering" (8-9). The unidentified narrator, assumed to be Lorde because of autobiographical information, reveals the metaphor of her eyes and the images:

> my eyes
> rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve
> wild for life, relentless and acquisitive
> learning to survive
> where there is no food (3-7)

Dragonfish evolve from eggs floating on top of water to larvae to adults that can move to the bottom. They are predators that attract prey with light. Her eyes are the caves; the

images are the dragonfish. Laura Dawkins explains the author's reluctance to become a poetic vampire, writing about human tragedy for artistic gain: "Self-reflexively interrogating her own enterprise as a writer, the poet suggests that she can neither construct nor speak about other, more nourishing visions because these violent, nightmarish images are the food she has been given, the reality she inhabits" (120).

In Part II, Lorde introduces the setting for the narrative. It is Jackson, Mississippi, during the historical 1979 flood, named the "Easter Flood of 1979" because it occurred in April. During days of heavy downpours, flash floods, thunderstorms, and tornadoes, the Pearl River went from 7.9 feet on April 2 to 28 feet on April 11. By April 13, it had reached 33.5 feet and continued its rapid rise until April 15 when it reached 42 feet. Most of Jackson was underwater, costing $500 million in damages (National Weather). The characters in this part are a nameless white woman, her "Two tow-headed children" (41), and "a man" (43) who has the power to silence her when she is questioned by a television reporter: "She ain't got nothing more to say!" (44). This woman is central to Lorde's "afterimages of the nightmare rain" (28). Lorde's water images flood not only the woman, but also the stanza, beginning with "The Pearl River floods through the streets of Jackson" (20). In one of the many similes, "Trapped houses kneel like sinners in the rain" (22). The woman is on the rooftop, where "the chimney / [is] now awash" (24-25). The city weeps; she is "tearless" (26) and "dry-eyed" (39). Surrounded by water, her body cannot produce any, and stunned by her sudden inexplicable loss, she communicates her pain over the airwaves:

> "we jest come from the bank yestiddy
> borrowing money to pay the income tax

now everything's gone,. I never knew

it could be so hard." (31-34)

Part of her pain is the violence communicated by her family's none-too-gentle contact with her while she is in such a fragile state. The "children hurl themselves against her" (41), and "a man with ham-like hands pulls her aside" (43). He is "snarling" (44) when he silences her before the reporters. Continuing the animal imagery, Lorde says "that lie hangs in his mouth / like a shred of rotting meat" (45-46).

In Part III, Lorde introduces her second afterimage, Emmett Till. She claims Jackson, Mississippi, and Emmett Till as an inheritance, received when she was 21 years old, the same age as the whistled-at Carolyn Bryant. Lorde's poetic license has changed some of the details of the murder. Instead of the Tallahatchie, it is the Pearl; instead of 14, Till is 15, and instead of Money, it is Jackson. But the core of the murder story remains, and it is the grisly details that become her second afterimage, causing a passive acceptance of violence, a level that people should not reach in a world that requires activists:

I learned to be at home with children's blood

with savored violence

with pictures of black broken flesh

used, crumpled, and discarded

lying amid the sidewalk refuse

like a raped woman's face. (76-81)

Lorde must steel herself against the media's intense coverage of the case, the details, the photos, the different angles, "screaming covers / larger than life / all over" (68-70).

Rather than becoming deadened by violence, Dawkins says, “The poet . . . similarly suggests that consumers of tabloid journalism during the summer of Till’s murder assumed a cannibalistic relations to the dead child, devouring gruesome newspaper images with their eyes before crumpling up and discarding them, implicitly from mind as well as sight” (121). On these magazine and newspaper covers is the iconic photo, the death photo (Fig. 4), the one that Till’s mother deemed a monster, which Lorde enlivens with her imagery: “the length of gash across the dead boy’s loins” (64) and “the severed lips, how many burns / his gouged out eyes” (66-67). This is the image that Mamie Till knew would move the nation and this is an image, “a veiled warning” (71), that the 45-year-old narrator can still pull from 24 years ago because “he was baptized my son forever / in the midnight waters of the Pearl” (54-55). She did not give birth to him; he becomes hers by a rebirth in spirit after his physical death. In her article, “It Could Have Been My Son,” Laura Dawkins analyzes both Brooks’ and Lorde’s poems about Emmett Till on their theme of motherhood. Citing several authors, Dawkins says that in the African American culture, the community has maintained a need for the “symbolic mother,” or Black mother, who in many cases replaces the biological mother. During slavery, especially, this substitute may have assumed the parental role for the mother who was sold. In the middle of the 20th century, these “symbolic mothers” functioned in the temporary absence of the biological mothers. Lorde focuses on the price that Carolyn Bryant paid for her actions, Dawkins says, but, “More importantly, ‘A Bronzeville Mother’ and ‘Afterimages’ suggest that motherhood potentially creates a bond

transcending racial and cultural differences" (113). Dawkins concludes that Lorde's Black mother role, this ability to nurture, exists in all of us, regardless of gender or race (112-119).

In addition to the feminist/womanist text of the poem, Lorde also deals with Black and white masculinity. Like Baldwin's Richard, Till has learned how to be a man from the men who defined manhood, white males. She says that "A black boy from Chicago / whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi / testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do" (82-84). The definers of manhood reserve that definition for themselves and are swift to punish offenders:

> his teachers
> ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue
> and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone
> in the name of white womanhood (85-88)

Using a violent action verb, ripped, with images unseparated by pauses, Lorde forces readers to see that a black man/child is not supposed to look (eyes), fornicate with (sex), talk to or whistle at (tongue) a white woman. As with Brooks' chivalrous Fine Prince, Lorde's words, linking sex and violence, give lie to the murderer's claim of chivalry. The murder that they commit in the white woman's defense arouses their sexual appetites that abuse women by placing them in a sex-for-hire role:

> they took their aroused honor
> back to Jackson
> and celebrated in a whorehouse

the double ritual of white manhood

confirmed. (89-93)

While Jackson was not the actual place and the offense was in a store, not the streets, Lorde's repetition of the city's name emphasizes that the South as place is complicit in the murder. No matter how much the news reporter Ethridge and the Mississippi citizens protested against generalizing (22-24), Black narratives and white records proved the general to be true. Even Baldwin's testimony about the police menacingly following him and Medgar Evers on the dark Mississippi roads contributes to the atmosphere of scare tactics and deadly violence. Cone argues against Mississippi innocence: "But insofar as white do-gooders tolerate and sponsor racism in their educational institutions, their political, economic, and social structures, their churches, and in every other aspect of American life, they are directly responsible for racism" (24).

Still unnamed, the white woman from Parts I and II is linked with Emmett Till in Part IV. In Part I, she was "no longer young" (26), and in Part IV, "a white girl has grown older in costly honor / (what did she pay to never know its price)" (98-99). The four stanzas in Part IV begin with a quotation about judging: "If earth and air and water do not judge them who are / we to refuse a crust of bread?" (94-95). The reason for the poetic license in the details becomes clear, crime and punishment. To make the case for sowing and reaping, Lorde has to move the site of Till's murder to the site of the 1979 flood, Jackson, Mississippi. The connection becomes clear when she repeats the woman's dialogue from Part I, ""Hard, but not this hard" (40, 102). She has become Carolyn Bryant, "a woman surveying her crumpled future / as the white girl besmirched by Emmett's whistle" (105-106). In her Old Testament logic, an eye for an eye, Lorde

supposes that the since the destitute woman is reaping the river's judgment, one of the three elements in the verse judgment, some 24 years later, then it is okay for her to "withhold [her] pity and [her] bread" (101). Stripped of dignity and belongings by the flood and a man who has silenced her, "she stands adrift in the ruins of her honor" (110). "A man with an executioner's face" (111) has used her to further his own white supremacist's ideology and the flood makes her "measure her life's damage" (124). It is then that "soundlessly / a woman begins to weep" (132-33). Like Brooks' ambiguity with the furious flower, the weeping woman is also ambiguous, according to Dawkins, who says, "The indeterminacy of the weeping woman's identity at the end of the poem compels the reader to view her as a raceless symbol of female grief, of 'ancient and familiar sorrows'" (125).

With a theme of images, the poem contains many, both descriptive and figurative. These images, of sight, mostly, make readers experience the flood waters and the power of nature to bring people and houses to their knees. Another repeated image is that of the raped woman. Of course, the raped white woman, a well-used trope in racial politics, is a frequent subject of repudiation in Black literature. After she names Emmett Till and claims his death photo, Lorde speaks of the

> pictures of black broken flesh
> used, crumpled, and discarded
> lying amid the sidewalk refuse
> like a raped woman's face. (78-81)

These lines end the second stanza in Part III, and the simile drawing the comparison is unambiguous. The second reference occurs in current time, "24 years his ghost lay like

the shade of a raped woman / and a white girl has grown older in her costly honor" (96-97). Here the syntax and enjambment of the lines complicate the idea with a sexually assaulted woman in one line and the girl grown into a woman whose worth is questioned in the next. Emmett is a ghost, and so is she, the ghost (shade) of a raped woman. Both placements of the rape images are juxtaposed with the accused assailant. In another comparison between the two, Emmett's tongue is cut out, but so is "the white girl['s who is] besmirched by Emmett's whistle" (106). She is "never allowed her own tongue" (107; she is "without power or conclusion" (108), and much like Brooks' Milk-white Maid, she is "unvoiced" (109). She has been "raped" twice, not only by a supposed wolf whistle, but also by her man. Emmett's tongue is cut out to prevent sexual expression; hers is removed to prevent acceptance of a Black man/boy's sexual expression or any expression that deals with her feelings. The artistic community becomes Emmett's voice; she is still silent, even in weeping.

On the CD, *The Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection*, she calls it a poem. The rhythmic repetition of "This is for the Pullman Porters" and attention to other sound qualities make it sound like a poem, but in print "Rosa Parks" looks like prose (*Quilting* 8-9) . Modern poetry relies on sight rather than sound because of the conversational quality of the poems. Giovanni does the opposite, performing with the rhythms of Black speech. An unconventional poetic form, with no lines and little or no capitalization or punctuation, is a characteristic of the Black Arts poets, as is the homage to historical figures. Although Stephen Henderson, the author of *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, says that the most written about historical figure is Malcolm X (25), for Giovanni, it is Emmett Till. From full discourse to a one-line mention, she reminds

readers of his symbolic meaning for Black male sexuality, for the outrage over such a heinous crime, and as the impetus for a social movement. In the "Commentary" that introduces "Rosa Parks" on the CD, Giovanni improvises an introduction before reading the poem, an artistic signature that is a trademark of her performances. She says that the poem in *about* Rosa Parks, the woman who sat down to take a stand against injustice and launched a movement, but it was *for* the Pullman Porters who provided vital services in the Black communities as couriers and messengers. One monumental service, according to Giovanni, was smuggling Till's body from Mississippi to Chicago, hiding the body in their personal effects despite the risk to their own safety. For the living Till, Giovanni imagines them as surrogate parents, or as what Dawkins defines as "symbolic kinship" (118):

> This is for the Pullman Porters who smiled and welcomed a fourteen-year-old boy onto their train in 1955. They noticed his stutter and probably understood why his mother wanted him out of Chicago during the summer when school was out. Fourteen-year-old boys with limps and stutters are apt to try to prove themselves in dangerous ways when mothers aren't around to look after them. (8)

Giovanni alludes to the emerging machismo of the teenager who perhaps attempted to impress his posse with his bold masculinity by flirting with Carolyn Bryant, the white woman for whom he was sentenced to death. In various news accounts, Bryant denies any physical or speech defects ("Mrs. Bryant" 95), which certainly would have made Till less threatening. The outrage over a life cut short comes through in the narrator's imagining a long and full life for Till:

> So this is for the Pullman Porters who looked over that fourteen-year-old while the train rolled the reverse of the Blues Highway from Chicago to St. Louis to Memphis to Mississippi. This is for the men who kept him safe; and if Emmett Till had been able to stay on a train all summer he would have maybe grown a bit of a paunch, certainly lost his hair, probably have worn bifocals and bounced his grandchildren on his knee telling them about his summer riding the rails. (8)

In the "Commentary" on the CD, Giovanni says that a life spent touring the cities by train would have resulted in a book: *My Life of Riding the Rails* by Emmett Till. She communicates the Black outrage by inventing this history and by repeating "fourteen-year-old boy." Longevity was not to be his: "But he had to get off that train. And ended up in Money, Mississippi. And was horribly, brutally, inexcusably, and unacceptably murdered" (8).

Historical accounts relate that the sheriff of the town had ordered Till's unembalmed body be buried in a local church cemetery. Arriving with the local undertaker, Uncle Moses claimed his grandnephew's body (Curry 36). The risk that the Pullman Porters took to get Till's body out of Mississippi resulted in an open casket with an cosmetically untouched Till, which, Giovanni says, launched a movement: "This is for the Pullman Porters who, when the sheriff was trying to get the body secretly buried, got Emmett's body on the northbound train, got his body home to Chicago, where his mother said: I want the world to see what they did to my boy" (8-9). Despite the four-month gap between the murder and the sit-down, many say that Till's death is the birth of the Civil

Rights Movement. Giovanni says so when she links the death of Till to the sit-down stand of Rosa Parks:

> And this is for all the people who said Never Again. And this is about Rosa Parks whose feet were not so tired, it had been after all, an ordinary day, until the bus driver gave her the opportunity to make history. . . . This is about the moment Rosa Parks shouldered her cross, put her worldly goods aside, was willing to sacrifice her life, so that that young man in Money, Mississippi, who had been so well protected by the Pullman Porters, would not have died in vain. When Mrs. Parks said "NO" a passionate movement was begun. (8-9)

Giovanni concludes the narrative poem by linking the activists and the martyr: "But it was the Pullman Porters who safely got Emmett to his granduncle and it was Rosa Parks who could not stand that death. And in not being able to stand it. She sat back down" (9). Like other poets, Giovanni certainly appreciates Till's growing pains, his mannish ways, but she focuses on the chain reaction, how his short life and brutal death became a symbol, leading a nation into truth.

In "Stardate #18628.90," Giovanni praises Till, along with other martyrs for the cause:

> This is a flag that we placed over
>
> . . .
>
> All the men and women lynched in the name of rape
>
> Emmett Till and all men murdered for allegedly raping white women
>
> Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The charge of rape was so prevalent in the 19th century that Ida B. Wells researched the phenomenon. She collected statistics from white publications to write and publish *A Red Record*. She says, "Of the 1,115 Negro men, women and children hanged, shot and roasted alive from January 1st, 1882, to January 1st, 1994, inclusive, only 348 of that number were charged with rape" (839). Even so there was clearly some doubt about the charge. Wells quotes one white woman: "I think he is the man. I am almost certain of it. If he isn't the man he is exactly like him" (843). The defendant's confession, however, reveals a business transaction, in which he paid the woman $25 for her services. Another example's ending strips it of humor. A friendship develops between a young Black farm worker and the daughter of the farm owner in Selma, Alabama. She delivers a baby and names the young Black man as the father. He is jailed and lynched. Well quotes a dispatch that described the lynching: "Upon his back was found pinned this morning the following: 'Warning to all Negroes that are too intimate with white girls. This the work of one hundred best citizens of the South Side'" (845). Malcolm X, who is named in the poem, while he was not charged with rape, certainly did time for being with a white woman. In 1946, when he was 20 years old, he was arrested for burglaries, but no one was interested in the burglaries. The officials wanted to know if he had slept with the white woman. Malcolm was sentenced to 10 years for a crime that usually carried a two-year sentence (*Autobiography* 173). "In the Spirit of Martin" is a postmodern poem with the icons and language of high and popular culture, such as the Civil Rights Movement, Lone Ranger, Ed Sullivan, "Four little Girls," "Selma," "Ralph and Martin," and "This is *Why We Can't Wait*," referring to the girls who went to church and were blown up by a

white supremacist's bomb, Ralph Abernathy and King's historic Selma march, and King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" to the white ministers of that city. Giovanni often enriches her poems with historical social references, as she does here, but she never mentions Till. She counts on her audience's familiarity with history to make the connection when she quotes Mamie Till's iconic line that expresses Till as the symbol of racism: "I want the World to see what they did to my boy" (12). In "Here's to Gwen," Giovanni honors her poetic ancestor and expresses outrage about Till's murder: "From the poignancy of a Bronzeville mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon, which is still the most brilliant work on the murder of Emmett Till" (30). "Another Aretha Poem" pays homage to cultural icon Aretha Franklin by telling of her value in the Black community. In an ironic passage about the lesson that children can learn in the South for a summer, Giovanni says, "Emmett's mother kissed him goodbye" (37). Then with a play on Fannie Lou Hamer's words about tired of being sick and tired, Giovanni says, "tired of 14-year-old boys being castrated" (37). The goodbye kiss is historical. Mamie Till says that she had to ask for it because in his excitement, Emmett had forgotten to kiss her and had to run back to do so. Although castration was a fate of many black males who stepped across the sexual divide, Emmett Till was not castrated, according to Mamie Till's narrative about identifying her son's body (Curry 26). How does Giovanni connect Aretha and Emmett Till? Aretha voiced our "pains and hopes and confusions and love" (37), and like many R & B singers of the 1960s and early 1970s, she voiced the soundtrack for the Black social movements.

The female narrator in "Bring on the Bombs: A Historical Interview" again links Till as symbol for the Civil Rights Movement:

> She knew ever since Emmett Till that somebody had to do something. Talk about a wake-up call. The horrible murder of Emmett Till rang a resounding bell to everybody. The Brown decision was in but the South was having none of it. As Roy Wilkins [NAACP field secretary] said It Was Because He Was A Boy. Those men murdered Till to show all parents what they would do. But Till put some iron in our backbone. Everybody had to stand up. I'm not a mother, at least I didn't birth children, but can you imagine the pain of Till's mother to go reclaim the body and then open the casket? (68)

The narrator emphasizes the media's contribution to the cause: "*Jet* and *Ebony* ran the pictures as did the *Afro-American* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. So did we. We ran a special issue. So the tension was high and getting higher. Then came Rosa Parks and King and Montgomery" (68). Myisha Priest ties the open casket to Blacks' agitation for civil rights: "Mamie Till reinscribed the cultural text that her son's ravaged body became, and insisted that the ravaged text of blackness could be a site of resistance and transformation" (56). Southern newspapers claimed that the public viewing of Till's murdered body was a plot hatched by the NAACP to make Mississippi look bad for not wanting to integrate public schools, which would change traditions. They claimed that Blacks and whites got along fine and that Wilkins was just trying to stir things up. One newspaper even blamed the NAACP for securing a ten-day-old corpse from some friends in Mississippi, placing Till's ring on it, planting it in the Tallahatchie for the locals to find, and identifying this corpse as Till who had been missing only three days. This wild supposition, despite Mamie Till and Uncle Moses' identification of the body, was enough

to plant reasonable doubt, affecting an acquittal for Till's murderers ("Sheriff Strider's" 98). Earl Ofari Hutchinson agrees with NAACP field secretary Roy Wilkins. In his book about the destruction of Black male images, he says, "Black men weren't lynched because they raped white women. In most cases they weren't even accused of a crime. Black men were lynched for the same reason they were demonized as lazy, irresponsible, sex-crazed brutes and defective: to maintain white control, power, and domination. Rape was a serviceable myth" (69-70). Ida B. Wells agrees that the lie was created to cover the white men's crimes. She says that it is peculiar that the rape-of-the-white-woman excuse for lynching was not used until after the Civil War because during the war white men felt secure enough to leave their homes and women in the care of male slaves (845). Finally, in Giovanni's "The Nashville Connection," a poem about the HBCU's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, there is a one-sentence mention, again calling attention to the brutality of racism and the beginning of a historical movement: "Spin now to Money, Mississippi, where Emmett Till was viciously murdered" (103). In the poem, this line is between the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision and Rosa Parks' bus ride. Giovanni's words become the picture of Till's murdered body. She often uses the words "horribly" and "viciously" when she describes his murder, and she often refers to the pain of a mother losing her only child. In her literary obsession with Till, he functions as a trope that she refers to often so that the world will not forget.

Probably the most distant from Till's 1955 murder are Giovanni's 2000-2002 poems. To capture the immediate swell of emotions, Harlem Renaissance star Langston Hughes wrote two poems about Till in 1955. In "Mississippi—1955," the subtitle is "(To the memory of Emmett Till)." Aside from the title, there is no mention of Till. Place

becomes the subject as “terror comes again / To Mississippi” (lines 6-7). Terror is personified, “masked—with only /jaundiced eyes /Showing through the mask” (14-16). Hughes’ repetition of mask linked with terror is clearly a reference to the racist practices of the Klan, with the yellowed eyes being monstrously fearsome and inhuman, reminiscent of Claude McKay’s “mad and hungry dogs” (3). Mississippi, as place, has earned a reputation that it cannot overcome as evidenced by the one word that ends the poem: Terror “Remain” (24). In addition to explicating the personification or “physical presence’ (64) of the poem, Priest says, “Rather, it is the specter or terror that actually appears, leaving the remembered body, the lynched body that Hughes saw as a site of rupture and resistance, haunting the edges of the text” (64). Similar to the personification in Hughes’ poem, Mississippi (assigned the feminine pronoun) became a public debate for two journalists in 1955, one from Jackson and one from New York. The journalist from the *Jackson Daily News* felt that Mississippi was being put on trial and exploited for her so-called backward ways. Much of this backward imagery was attributed to the socialist plots of the NAACP. Angry at the public display of Till’s mutilated body in Chicago, Tom Ethridge compared the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins to a witch doctor in the African Congo who would display the body of a murdered tribesman to motivate the tribesmen to revenge. Ethridge said that “[Wilkins] has argued that the guilt and responsibility rests not merely with Emmett Till’s killers but with the entire state of Mississippi as well. His hysterical outbursts blame our entire clergy, press and citizenry” (41). Ethridge envisioned Mississippi as a fair place where justice would be done without any outside interference (40-42). A journalist from the *New York Post* thought that the judge and the prosecutor went out of their way to show Mississippi in a good light. In a

piece entitled “The Future,” he wrote that they were evidence that the old ways of intimidation were dying. He concluded, “All that makes the headlines—the murder, the deputies, the inevitable acquittal—is a dying present; Curtis Swango [the judge] and Mamie Bradley [Till] are the future; just the sound of their voices, speaking with dignity and without fear, is a death verdict for the beast that sits and swaggers all around them” (Kempton 87). In the 1955 article that follows this published poem, Hughes, himself, indicts the U.S. government and especially Mississippi with lynching statistics, examples, and his conclusion: “Certainly I think Mississippi must lead the world in the lynching of children” (125). He says that Blacks were being investigated for their un-American activities, but no one investigated the white Mississippians who were denying blacks the right to vote, go to school, or to use public facilities. With irony, Hughes points Mississippi in the right direction: “Senator Eastland from Mississippi might well consider calling such an investigation now while public interest is high. It ought to be even easier to catch lynchers than it is Communists especially in Mississippi, where they have no respect for the legal age” (126). Some critics do not see the place as subject. Priest, for example, responds to Till’s absence in Hughes’ poem. She begins by explaining the Black body as text. When white people used the lynched body for text, Priest says, the narrative was spread by pictures and newspapers. “The black body became a sign of material and textual power, and a warning against black transgression” (54). When Black reporters tried to make a text to let Blacks know what was happening and to move them to political action, they had trouble getting the message disseminated. Priest says, “Till’s erasure from the poem crafted in his honor dramatizes how efforts at humanizing the black body can be thwarted by the forms of its representation. Instead of memorializing

Till, “Mississippi—1955” memorializes and personifies the act of his destruction” (56). The second Hughes’ poem is actually lyrics to a blues song that was accompanied by a guitar. The song varies the three-line traditional blues stanza that states a problem, repeats, then delivers the punch line. Hughes appropriated this blues form during the Harlem Renaissance and made it more poetic by cutting each line in half to make a six-line stanza, as illustrated in the popular “Homesick Blues.” Varying the folk form a bit in “The Money Mississippi Blues,” Hughes repeats the desire not to go to Money, Mississippi, in what would be lines one and two of the three-line blues stanza, but lines one through four of the poem. Part of the refrain is “I don’t want to go to Money, honey” (1). Then, he delivers the punch line, which tells why: “There’s pity, sorrow, and pain” (5). Again, the site of the murder, Money, which is mentioned more that 23 times, becomes the place of terror. For crossing the sexual, racial divide, Till

> Like old boy, just fourteen years old
> shot, kicked, and beaten ‘cause he was so bold
> to whistle at a woman who was white
> He was throwed in the river in the dead of night (23-26)

Like Giovanni, Hughes’ poems focus on Till’s age, the supposed crime, and the swift racist reaction. Not only does this crime take place in the Mississippi Delta, the birthplace of the blues, but also the characters and the tragic subject matter make a blues song that writers have been singing ever since.

Other poets who are not as well known as Hughes, Brooks, and Giovanni pay tribute to Till also. James A. Emanuel’s one-stanza poem “Emmett Till” immortalizes the youth:

I hear a whistling

Through the water

Little Emmett

Won't be still. (1-4)

In the oral tradition, "being still" means resting in peace, so the narrator honors this tradition, relating that Emmett is not resting. In the words of the elders, Emmett is worrying the artists, so they must keep his memory alive in print. For the narrator, Till becomes a "bedtime story" to pass on. Inventing an alternate reality, Emanuel describes Till as the "fairy /River Boy / Who swims forever" (11-13). The gruesomeness of his death, however, is not the stuff of bedtime stories, so with ironic use of details, the narrator creates a happy ending, in which Till swims "Deep in treasure / Necklaced in / A coral toy (14-16).

Anthony Walton's 1996 "The Lovesong of Emmett Till" deals with Black male sexuality and the forbidden white woman. In some media reports, Till was said to have flashed pictures of white girls from Chicago. Baldwin includes this detail in the drama *Blues for Mr. Charlie*. In the play, Richard brags about his white women and shows pictures to his Southern friends. The poem's narrator claims that Till had traded his baseball cards for a picture of a white girl and that she did not know this: "He carried his love / like a burden, and devotion / always has to tell" (12-14) Even though she is a secret love, worshipped from afar, she is not forbidden, so for Till, the irony of Southern white anger comes through:

Hell, he was just flirting

with that lady in the store

he already had his white

woman back up in Chicago. (15-18)

The poet's diction exposes the manchild's indignation as he tries to justify his actions. He begins his Mack, striking a cool pose for his country cousins:

He wasn't greedy, just showing

off, showing the rustics

how it was done. He had an eye,

all right, and he was free

with it, he knew they loved it.

Hey baby, was all he said, (19-24)

So he compliments her with his full masculine attention: an endearment, a wink, an embrace, or a whistle, any one of the varying accounts of his assault that made the white men come for him, and because of the freedom that he has had in Chicago, "he thought it was / a joke" (29-30). The narrator in Walton's poem claims that Till died for two offenses: his insult to the Mississippi white woman and his devotion to the nameless Chicago white girl in the photo

. . . who must by now be an older

woman in Chicago, a woman

who will never know

she was to die for, that he died

refusing to take back her name,

his right to claim he loved her. (35-40)

Finally, President Barack Obama's inaugural poet, Elizabeth Alexander, wrote a poem about Muhammad Ali entitled "Narrative: Ali." In the 12 rounds of the poem, Ali talks about the making of a champ. In round 2, Ali talks about Till, one person who influenced him:

> Two photographs
> of Emmett Till
> born my year,
> on my birthday.
> One, he's smiling,
> Happy, and the other one
> is after. His mother
> did the bold thing,
> kept the casket open,
> made the thousands look upon
> his bulging eyes,
> his twisted neck,
> her lynched black boy.
> I couldn't sleep
> for thinking,
> Emmett Till. (12-27)

Ali begins the poem with the iconic photographs (Figs. 1, 4) and the name and ends with the name. He confesses his inability to rest because the body won't rest; just as in Emanuel's poem, there is no rest in peace for Emmett Till. This idea relates to the

mystical journey that comforted his mother, Till's mission, his journey on Earth. Clearly in this poem, Till functions as a symbol of racism and the move to action that his death caused. Ali acts in the next stanza; he derails a train. An afterimage for Ali, the face of racism is expressed by "his bulging eyes ,/his twisted neck /her lynched black boy" (22-24). This open display of racial hatred causes unrest, not only with Ali, but also with the Black nation.

Critical artists think that poetry functions to illuminate the needs of Black people. From slavery to Black Power, poets have prescribed the functional purpose of art. One star of the 1960s Black Arts Movement, Haki Madhubuti, defines the role of the Black artist in Introduction to *Think Black*. He says that artists should direct their writing to the people to make them aware of injustices in their community and "destroy perpetuators of evil" (2092). Brooks, Coleman, Lorde, Giovanni, Hughes, and others began in 1955 and continue to this day to say that what happened to Emmett Till in 1955 was evil and that they will use their art to reinforce their commitment to ending racial violence.

CHAPTER 3

Fiction

Bebe Moore Campbell and Lewis Nordan weave fictional narratives around a character that represents Emmett Till, and Toni Morrison includes him as a historical figure that the fictional characters talk about in *Song of Solomon*. The heyday of the Black women writers has passed, even though they are still producing, but nothing on the scale of *The Color Purple* in 1982 or *Beloved* in 1988 or *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982. Focusing on womanist issues of creativity, family, and relationships, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor, the Big Three, laid huge literary tracks for the next generation of writers to follow. While the works of the Big Three saturated college bookstores and classrooms, they did not move as swiftly into popular culture, until Oprah. Enter Terry McMillan, who put booksellers and filmmakers on notice about the very large reading and viewing public of Black women. Although she had written *Mama* and *Disappearing Acts*, it was 1992's *Waiting to Exhale* that put her on the popular culture literary map, and with her astronomical literary and box office successes, the formulaic pattern of three or four friends ruminating about the men in their lives was born. That same year, 1992, Bebe Moore Campbell wrote *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, a novel that puts her more in the tradition of the Big Three than the romantic relationship tradition of her contemporaries. While the relationship dialogue does exist, it exists against a larger social landscape. The relationships are discussed in relation to the social fabric, not in isolation of it. To illustrate the long-term effects of racism on both Blacks and whites suggests a social responsibility that went against the tastes of the times. Campbell traces the blues in the fictionalized lives of the principal players from the

Emmett Till tragedy. History blurs with art. Campbell imagines a fiction, which is similar to Baldwin's play; however, Campbell remains closer to history. Floyd Cox, his brother John Earl, and their father Lester are the assassins of Armstrong Todd, a 15-year-old Emmett Till figure. Three assassins parallel some historical accounts of three men coming to Uncle Moses' house to get Till. Campbell does take a few liberties with the historical accounts. Todd is in a pool hall instead of a store, but it is owned by Cox and run by a Tom named Jake, instead of Cox's wife, for the "niggers" to have somewhere to go. Lily, the former beauty queen and Cox's wife, comes into the hall where Armstrong is posturing with the boys, speaking French. Struck by her beauty, he speaks a few words of French in her direction. There is no whistle. There is no touch. The Tom, Jake, tells Cox that the boy, who had earlier insulted Jake, spoke French to his wife. Not satisfied with the talking to that Floyd gives the "nigger," John Earl and Lester haul Floyd to Armstrong's grandmother's house where they beat Armstrong and shoot him down in the yard, like a dog. He accuses them before he dies. Again, as in history and other fictionalized accounts, there is no doubt about the murderers. Just like Mamie Till, Delotha, Armstrong's mother, defies the white power structure and sneaks Armstrong's body to Chicago for an open-casket funeral, but because his father and the white accuser, Lily, say that he looks like he is sleeping, Armstrong's corpse bears no resemblance to the monstrous remains of Emmett Till (Fig. 4) that Mamie Till did not believe any undertaker had the skill to "fix him up" (Curry 26). These events occur rather quickly, and readers who are familiar with the history will pick up on subtle differences between Campbell's fiction and history. The major difference is that the bulk of the novel explores the cause and effect relationship in the lives of the murderers and the victims that occurs,

along with major historical events, over 40 or more years after the death of Armstrong Todd, but there is still the discourse on racial and sexual relations in the South.

Regardless of class, white males assert superiority, yet their male pride and arrogance denies the same for Black males. This tradition of access and privilege based upon the sole criterion of one's having white skin passes from generation to generation and becomes the established code of behavior for Southern white males. Floyd Cox is a coward who does not really want to confront Armstrong, but tradition dictates that he should: "For a moment he stood motionless, trying to decide what to do, because if the boy had talked crazy to Lily he had to do something" (20). He has learned his racial attitudes from his father, and Floyd does not want to let him down: "*I shoulda hit that boy,* Floyd thought. *You always gotta hit a nigger what steps outta line; keeps the other ones respectful. What was I thinking of? Lord, I don't want this getting back to Daddy and them*" (21). Suzanne Jones affirms this reading of the code: "The southern racial code his father has instilled in him requires that he confront Armstrong in order to affirm his masculinity" (167), yet Jones does not mention Floyd's cowardice. He does not want to talk to Armstrong, so he certainly does not want to kill him. Floyd's father leads the murderous attack. In her article, Jones analyzes the cause and effect structure of Campbell's novel. She says that Campbell is answering the questions of how someone could kill in that manner and why some whites did nothing to stop this brutality. She theorizes that whites, as well as Blacks, were affected by racism, and although criticized for the unrealistic happy ending, Campbell has a vision of hope for healing between the sexes and the races (161-177). Jones, however, seems to put more emphasis on Floyd's "psychological wounds" (168) than his racial education when she says that the deer-

hunting incident, in which Floyd's father accused him of acting like a girl for crying over a wounded deer, is the cause of Floyd's behavior. His racist upbringing is surely at fault, but mostly it is the childhood slights and wounds at the hands of his verbally and psychologically abusive father (167-68).When his brother and father take him to clean up his mishandling of Armstrong, they reinforce the code of Southern white males: "'Certain way you handle niggers that talk French to white ladies and say the schools is gon' integrate' Lester said" (29). By killing Armstrong, Floyd asserts his manhood, as prescribed by the code, and is rewarded for his part in the murder:

> Later, when Floyd would try to forget everything else about this night, he would still recall the ride back home, the smoky air of the congested cab, the three of them pressed in close together, singing and laughing as their shoulders touched. What warmed him more than anything was the sure, true knowing that his father, at last, was satisfied with him. (40)

This code helps white males who commit violence against Black males evade the criminal justice system. John Earl tells Floyd that the sheriff won't come because "not a man around here wouldn't have done the same thing" (53). Of course, when John Earl says "man," he is speaking of white men because Black males are not included in the definition of man. Being a 15-year-old, Armstrong certainly cannot be defined as man, but Floyd does not even count him as human. In the constant associations of him with murder, Floyd thinks: "Up until that moment he'd never even associated the word 'murder' with what he'd done to the colored boy. Murder was in the movies; it was what white people did to each other, crazy white people. It wasn't what white people did to niggers. He'd righted a wrong, that's what he'd done" (94). The ruling class has the same

attitudes, just different tactics. To maintain appearances of civility and righteousness, Clayton's father tells his powerbroker peers that he wants the Coxes jailed for Armstrong's murder, and "the uproar was sudden and clamorous. The idea that whites, even poor white trash, be punished for crimes against colored people was unheard of among the esteemed planters in that room" (89). Yet despite all the statistics and anecdotal stories to back up the statistics, according to news media, Mississippians were surprised that outsiders believed that there was a code of silence that condoned the terrorizing and assassination of Black males ("Grandstand" 59).

In all cases that involve Black men and white women, white men define the crime and dictate the punishment. Black males are denied due process. A posse of white males became judge, jury, and executioners. One of Till's assassins, J. W. Milan, told a reporter how and why he killed Emmett: "As long as I live and I can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. They ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger even gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin.' I'm likely to kill him" (Huie 207). This is the prevailing attitude. An "Observer" in Greenville, Mississippi, wrote in 1955:

> Many years ago the white people of the South realized that the law offered no adequate protection for their women, and as always all over the world, when the law is unable to protect, the people provide their own protection for their families. For this reason it became an unwritten law that no Negro should approach a white woman, and if he did, the penalty was drastic. ("Selected Letters" 150-151)

When the sheriff questions Floyd about the Todd murder, Floyd responds, “A man’s got a right to protect his wife” (71). Floyd is also quick to assert the chivalrous code. He says, “My wife is carrying my name. What kind of man would I be if I just let any ignorant nigger that wants to talk to her just any ole kind of way? A man’s got a right to protect his property, his children, and his wife. Ain’t that right? Ain’t that what America is all about?” (73). Yet, Ida B. Wells refutes white males’ claim of chivalry to protect white women (801). Again, Black men are not included in this constitutional right to protect family and property. Because they would be protecting themselves from white males in both instances, they are punished severely for merely entertaining the thought.

There is only a small leap to integration of public schools as the ultimate offense to and assault upon the white population. Just like Till, Todd is unfamiliar with Southern whites, but “Every colored person in town had learned that Armstrong Todd was killed by the Coxes because he spoke French to Lily Cox. They also understood that he’d been murdered because of the Supreme Court’s ruling against segregated schools” (63). *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was 1954; Emmett Till was murdered in 1955. Similar to Milan’s confession to reporter William Huie in 1955, Lester, Floyd’s father, says, “When a nigger starts talking nasty to a white woman, well . . . And when they start talking about going to school with white children, well, they asking for it” (53). Earl Ofari Hutchinson uses mainstream media to prove his thesis that the Black male image is under assault. He looks at popular figures, such as Clarence Thomas, Mike Tyson, Michael Jackson, and Colin Power to show how their run-ins with media and popular perceptions fuel the stereotypes that began in slavery as a means to control Black males. The most popular of these stereotypes is that Black men are oversexed beasts in pursuit of white women to

ravage and despoil. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the "rape of white woman" was used to justify lynching and subjugation. These images were reinforced in popular culture with movies such as *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, which was based on Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman*. These invented images lingered into present day media and popular culture. Hutchinson uses the media obsession with the O. J. Simpson trial as evidence of the link between race and sex in America (20-174). For Campbell's characters, their fear is that integrated schools will give Black males unprecedented access to white females. Their fear of projecting a backward-town image is not as powerful as their fear of Black males: "'Maybe we're better off letting those Yankees think we are savages. That way they won't try to send our little girls to school with a bunch of black apes' said Henry Settles," a member of the town's ruling class (90). Hutchinson reports a similar exchange from Chief Justice Earl Warren's memoirs:

> In 1954 Eisenhower had more than political reservations about the Brown decision on school desegregation. At a White House dinner party, Ike winked, nodded, and whispered to Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren that he understood why Southerners wouldn't want "to see their sweet little girls required to sit in school alongside some big black buck." (29-30)

Southern white males, but more importantly Civil Rights activists, made the connection between Emmett Till's murder and the integration of public schools.

Probably the most chilling line in Campbell's fiction is spoken by Lily who is physically abused by Floyd, her husband, and therefore has low self-esteem, despite being a former beauty queen: "Lily thought: *I got a man who'll kill for me*" (55). When

Floyd is in jail, he becomes the white knight of his own chivalrous romance as he publicly fondles Lily: “Floyd kissed her again, longer and deeper, a kiss that cut off her breath. He slipped his hands through the bars and grabbed her waist, and squeezed and pressed her against the bars until he heard her gasp. ‘Lily, Lily,’ he whispered when he took his lips off her mouth. ‘I done it for you. For your protection.’” (100). Preening from being the center of attention at a murder trial, Lily does not like the tone of the testimony. She questions the proceedings: “Why wasn’t it enough to say that her husband had killed because he loved and wanted to protect her? She wanted everyone to know that” (119). Of course, Lily supports the code (lie) of her men, even in the face of eyewitness testimony: “There was an uproar when Darnell finished speaking, as the whites reacted to the boy’s assertion that one of their prettiest women had been fascinated enough by a black boy to want to stand around and listen to him speak a language she didn’t understand” (115). When Lily takes the stand, she justifies her husband’s murder. She testifies under oath, “And as I was standing there, this colored boy, well, he come out and he give me such a look that I got scared. And I started to run back to the truck, but he wouldn’t let me pass” (119). She continues the lie: “he—he started saying nasty things to me. Horrible things” (119). Armstrong Todd’s offense goes from speaking French to nasty talk to nasty deeds, behavior that white males must squash before it can spread to the general Black male population. Lily does not report a touch or a physical assault. Armstrong, like Richard, is sentenced for his talk. Jones speaks about Armstrong’s French:

> With their connotation of intimacy, however, these phrases suggest to readers just how daring Armstrong’s subsequent eye contact and exchange

> of laughter with Lily is, transforming their chance encounter into an almost deliberate flirtation, which is exactly what Floyd Cox will accuse him of. That Campbell portrays the encounter as accidental only amplifies readers' shock at its outcome. (166)

Myisha Priest wrote an article on Langston Hughes' poem about Emmett Till, but her point fits well here. In talking about Till's offense, Priest says that "criminal speech was second only to rape as an incitement to lynch, an odd doubling that suggests that crimes of the voice were akin to rape in their power to violate, and bore a peculiar relation to the violation of white manhood" (59).

Jones justifies Lily's behavior by looking at her childhood of sexual abuse and her husband's physical and emotional abuse. She says, "Campbell suggests that the only way Lily can live with Floyd's emotional and physical brutality is to embrace a narrative of his heroism in protecting her from the proverbial 'black male beast,' even if he is actually a harmless teenage boy" (167). According to Jones, the chilling line is the way that Lily "consoles herself" (167). Lily appears to be doing more than consoling herself, however; she is enjoying her new-found status as the woman who symbolizes the code of protected white womanhood, so she gets a boost to her ego and her self-worth. Moreover, Lily's character shows that instead of denouncing their men's actions, white women basked in them. The facts: Lily goes into the pool hall after Floyd tells her to stay in the truck. Armstrong is speaking French to his boys. When he notices her he directs a few words her way. That is the extent of the exchange between them, but to project herself as the damsel in distress, Lily advances Floyd's lie. The effect of that lie moves into the next generation. Floyd and Lily's children cannot escape. Floydjunior disrespects Lily: "'He

killed a nigger for you. That's what.' He was smiling, with tight lips that were full of malice. Standing in the middle of the road, her son's words echoing around her, Lily was aware for the first time that the death of Armstrong Todd was not behind her. She felt his memory growing inside her like a new life" (200). It takes Lily some time to realize that the code of protection was not about her. After the murder, Floyd and John Earl lose their businesses. They begin drinking heavily and cannot support their families. John Earl's wife voices their fears after their lives have fallen apart: "Sometimes I sit and think about things that have happened. That night, Lily, that night when Floyd and John Earl went after that boy, we couldn't have stopped neither one of them if we . . . I was wrong, Lily. Loving us didn't have nothing to do with it" (292). This seed of doubt grows in Lily until she finally confronts Floyd for asserting a white masculine code of behavior that had nothing to do with protecting her, a white woman. She accuses, "You ain't done nothing for me. Everything was for you. To make you feel good. Even that boy" (326). Growing up with the abusive Floyd makes Floydjunior more perceptive than his mother. He challenges his father, "What you think you're gonna do? Kill me like you killed that nigger you was supposed to be protecting Mama from? The only person she ever needed protection from is you" (268).

The Black community is not fooled. "An old woman named Mattie cleared her throat. 'They burned that Thomas boy up, wasn't three years ago. Said he attacked one of them white girls live right near the bayou. Lying trash'" (63). Armstrong's mother longs to avenge the lie and her son. Delotha plots, "She would go to Floyd and Lily's house and climb in their window while they slept. Shoot him in bed while his own wife watched. Kill him first and then shoot her. Shoot her for telling the lie that killed her son" (148).

The lie began after slavery. In *A Red Record,* Ida B. Wells further explains the creation of the rape myth. She says that white men created it after slavery to justify the violence that they committed against black men who thought to exercise a hard-won freedom. The rape myth did not exist during slavery because it was not needed. White men enlisted in the Civil War for the Southern cause and left their family and property in the hands of Black men. Yet suddenly, without the restraining hand of slavery, these same men who protected white women became rapists. Using statistics from white publications, Wells says that society needs to question the white man's definition of rape. She concludes, "With the Southern white man, any misalliance existing between a white woman and a colored man is a sufficient foundation for the charge of rape. The Southern white man says that it is impossible for a voluntary alliance to exist between a white woman and a colored man, and therefore, the fact of an alliance is a proof of force" (799). Wells paid dearly for her research. She was exiled, stripped of property, and threatened with death for publishing an editorial in her paper *Free Speech* in Memphis, May 21, 1892, about the charge of rape.

These statistics held a threat over a Black boy child in Mississippi, which begs the question of why Till was there. Giovanni answers that in her poetry. She claims that the city is dangerous for Black teenaged males. Mamie Till did not answer the why, but she did tell on the witness stand how she schooled Emmett on proper servile behavior toward Southern white males. She advised him to add sir to all responses, not to look any white woman in the eye, and to get on his knees if he had to assuage any feelings of his wrongdoing (Hutto 81). In small gatherings, some Black males humorously told of their feigned respect for white male authority after crossing the Mason-Dixie line. No matter

the mask, Black people who had escaped came down home to visit their mothers, grandmothers, and relatives who had been left behind. The question arises in Campbell's fiction. Why was Armstrong Todd in the South? Some blame his mother Delotha. One friend warns, "I tell you, girl, you got more nerve than I do. When I left Greenville, that was it for me and Mississippi. I don't want to see that place no more. And I wouldn't dare send no child of mine down there" (41). Certainly, Delotha's estranged husband, Wydell, blames her for Armstrong's death. His bartender brings the question to him: "Well, I guess she had her reasons. Sending him down there anyway, it sure was a damn shame, what happened" ((153). Wydell then questions, "What was his boy doing in Mississippi? Why was he living there?" (153). Warming up to passing the blame, Wydell continues, "Why couldn't 'Lotha raise the child herself, instead of shipping him off to Odessa? . . . 'A mule got a better chance at living than a nigger in Mississippi. And that's the truth'" (153). Even the boys who are there are being prepared to leave. Ida, who fails to convey vital information to save Armstrong "because she had trusted a white woman with his life" (86), works night and day to save enough to get her young son to Chicago. In addition to new opportunities, imagines Ida, Sweetbabe would remain alive. After reconciling, Delotha and Wydell have another boy, and the thought of his fate paralyzes Wydell: "But when Delotha said, 'Of course he will. All the Todd men have freckles,' he was filled with dread. Another boy, he thought. They kill the boys, the men. Hang them by their necks and then torch their lifeless bodies. Throw them on the chain gang for nine hundred years" (222). Finally, Delotha blames herself for sending her child to Mississippi. She says that "he was just a hardheaded mannish boy who wore her out" (42). She continues, "Of course, Armstrong hadn't wanted to leave her. That was natural.

Delotha had tried to talk up the place, but he was being stubborn that day she put him on the train, muleheaded and vindictive, trying to make her feel guilty" (42). She does feel guilty and nearly destroys her second chance at happiness by alienating everyone except Armstrong's replacement. In her article for *Callaloo*, Koritha Mitchell explains Delotha's guilt as part of the literary tradition that shows the super strong, asexual Black females to counter the loose-woman stereotypes in white literature and film. Campbell, then, according to Mitchell, creates a complex character who has to bear the burden of her son's death and her guilt for being a sexual being. Mitchell says that Delotha uses this sexuality to gain a replacement son and then focuses all of her attention on "selfless motherhood," which mirrors the life of Mamie Till-Bradley and the ideal lives of white women (1048-63). As with Hughes' poem, Mississippi, as place, cannot rise above its reputation as a deadly region for Black males. Wanda Rushing talks about the paradox of place in her text about Memphis: "We can think of 'place' as uniquely situated in networks of global relations and cultural flows, as well as embedded in accumulated local history and culture" (21). She says that even as Memphis tries to globalize, it holds on to traditions about race that regionalizes it. The concept fits 1955 Mississippi. The slow, agrarian life, with wide open spaces, seems idyllic for raising boys, yet Black boys are stymied by a racial caste system that dates back to slavery with codes that restricted movement and dictated a subservient behavior, hardly an atmosphere for raising men. James Baldwin tells of the terror in Mississippi; Richard Wright speaks about it, and the *Ebony* reporter recalls it in her retrospective: six white men "armed with shotguns glittering in the sun" rode slowly and menacingly through the Black community (Larsson 54). Moreover, in 1955, television contributed to the global concept. As the images of

Emmett Till and the trial in Sumner were broadcast across the world, Europe and other countries responded negatively to Americans' policing of the world when their own affairs showed such brutal human rights offenses (Metress 141).

In Campbell's cause-effect pattern, there is enough blame to go around. In the white community, Lily feels the brunt of Floyd's anger for changing his life. "He liked her begging him. Why shouldn't she beg him? If it hadn't been for her, he'd still have his business. He wouldn't have to be digging ditches with niggers for two dollars a day" (139). In another instance, Lily thinks, "Floyd just grunted, and she thought: *That's right. Blame me*" (83). When her mother-in-law sees her family disintegrating before her eyes, she blames Lily as the cause of their troubles: "'I reckon John Earl, Louetta, and them would still be living right here in Hopewell if it wasn't for that trouble you caused,' the old woman told her, right in front of Floyd" (83). Floyd loses his business, cannot get a job, and turns to crime. He is soon in jail with his most feared and hated enemies, Black men, and they do not disappoint: "In a way, Floydjunior reminded him of Salinger, one of the menacing blacks in the joint, who liked to slam his food tray into Floyd's back when he stood behind him at mess, whispering in his ear. 'You killed that black boy, didn't you? You better watch out, cracker. The brothers is gon' kick your ass good'" (258).

One reason for the change in Black male attitudes towards white males is the advent of civil rights. The whites blame the social movement: "All that unrest in Montgomery has these niggers stepping outta they place. If they think Rosa Parks and some scrawny colored minister gonna come down here stirring up trouble, they been tasting too much moonshine" (122). Campbell's text respects history; the Till character is responsible for the movement: "The realization that people all over the country had

witnessed their oppression encouraged new dreams. In subtle ways the death of Armstrong Todd began to change them" (122). The white citizens of the Mississippi Delta watch the emergence of Black humanity on television and become alarmed. The killers' mother and wife express their views: "'These is terrible times we's living in,' Mamie said later when she calmed herself. 'In North Ca'lina them niggers is trying to eat at the Woolworth's with white folks. Sit-in, they call it. Lordy, Lordy. What is this world coming to? And they say that Kennedy is on their side. He's gon' try to make them as good as us'" (185). Despite instigating a murder and being proud to be the wife of a killer, Lily cannot understand Blacks' behavior, but pinpoints the movement as the cause: "She glanced around, searching for a seat, and caught the eye of a morose-looking black woman who scowled at her and rolled her eyes with such hostility that Lily looked away. *That's the way they been acting ever since integration*, she thought; *just as mean and hateful as they can be*" (228).

The new Negroes cause jealousy in white characters, as if Blacks are getting something that belongs rightfully to whites. This emotion is in the lower class whites represented by Floyd and his family. Refusing to take responsibility for his life and his actions, he sees a few crumbs coming to Blacks because of their agitation and the government's shame, and he is angry. He fails to realize his social status. Instead of privilege, just by being white, he now has to compete for jobs with people who are more educated and sophisticated. He is an ex-con, trying to get a job at McDonald's: "And when he was walking out of the place, whom should he see serving customers but some nigger. Even now he couldn't stand thinking about that: A nigger could get a job, while he starved to death. Niggers had the Supreme Court and Congress looking after their

interests, and who cared about his? (328). Just as he received this poison from his father, Floyd passes it to his son, Floydjunior who watches a successful Black businessman on television. Clearly, like Floyd wanted from his murderous kin, Floydjunior wants his father's approval: "'Look at that. Just look at that.' He was staring at Floyd, waiting for an answer. 'Goddamn niggers,' he snarled. 'Goddamn niggers have everything. There ain't nothing left for us'" (260). In what she calls male bonding over shared racist attitudes, Jones uses this example to show that "The Cox men equate black progress with stealing white jobs, and thus they label integration as the source of their own economic problems. They see themselves as victims of affirmative action and refuse to accept any responsibility for their own fate . . ." (173). From Lily's viewpoint, however, Floyd's problems are of his own making. She thinks, "And it was a relief not to have to listen to him talking about niggers. It got so that all he talked about was how much he hated niggers, like that was filling the space that a job would have occupied" (288).

Just as in Baldwin's *Blues*, there is a white liberal who acts admirable until his tradition is threatened; then he remembers that he is a white man. Clayton Pinochet is heir to the Pinochet Plantation and traditions. He has heard his father's sermons on his legacy so often that he imagines a scolding for a draft of his news article about Armstrong's death:

> *Now, son, you have to be careful what you put in print. People might think that's how you really feel. You know we've lived in this area for generations. The Pinochets have built something to be proud of here, a tradition that must continue unchanged. We got a code down here, a way*

> *to keep things in order. Checks and balances, just like the government of the United States. That boy died was out of order, plain and simple*. (61).

Trying to break the tradition, he keeps a Black mistress and thwarts his father's urgings to "marry and father children. White children" (249). He behaves in ways to prove that he is better than the men, like his father, whose machinations keep the niggers in their place: "The primacy they enjoyed had been historically bestowed upon them; it was their legacy. Their great-grandfathers had made the family fortunes with blacks and cotton, and both had continued to enrich them. And not by chance" (88). They also rule the likes of the white trash Coxes: "And much worse had been sanctioned on the second floor of the municipal building by the Honorable men assembled there. Much worse. And now they were going to decide the fates of the men who'd murdered Armstrong Todd" (88). While being white prevents them from seeing justice done for Blacks, being rich and powerful makes them want to preserve their position against outside scrutiny. So for the elder Pinochet and his kind, facilitating the arrest of the Coxes is a means to an end, rather than a just response to a brutal murder. Certainly, Clayton Pinochet thinks that he is better than the Honorable men. He teaches his Black mistress and Black children how to read. He mentors Armstrong Todd, and when he gets wind of Armstrong's trouble with the Coxes, he asserts a different Southern white male code: "Under the paternalistic code of the Delta, he could exercise proprietary rights over Armstrong in the face of any other white person threatening the boy's welfare" (27). He aids the Black community when he can and truly seems to want to do what is right. When a racist waitress rants about Yankees reporters being in town and questions why anyone would want to write something in a newspaper about a nigger" (78), Clayton wants to respond:

> He wanted to give her one, to say to Florine that he believed that Negroes were human beings and deserved better than being murdered by trash like the Coxes. He wanted to stand on the top of the table and hurl his plate of steaming chicken-fried steak across the counter and tell all the customers in the café, as they picked the globs of mashed potatoes from their eyes and hair, that he, Clayton Pinochet, had called in the Yankees and was glad they were here with their notepads and pencils, their cameras and flash bulbs, and hoped that more would come, because it was time that the entire country learned about the barbaric cannibalism that was eating them all alive. A scream was burning through his throat like whiskey. (78)

Like many white liberals, Clayton has a savior complex. He muses, "One day he would speak out. One day he would save black people, lead them out of their misery" (78). He goes against his father by warning Delotha that the Honorable men do not want Armstrong's body to leave Mississippi. "She needed his help, though; that was clear enough. If only he could help her. If only he could help them all" (103). This service attitude that he is anxious to deploy abandons him when he gets the chance to help someone, his newly-discovered, Black half-sister Ida. When she approaches him to gain some of the access and privilege that he has enjoyed but that she has been denied, he reverts to white-man status and moves to protect his wealth and position of power, just as his father would have done. He turns cold toward Ida: "Their friendship was forgotten. All that talk of his about wanting to see black people take their rightful place in society was just talk. He didn't want to share. 'And just what do you think you deserve? What do you really want?' She'd never noticed how hard his eyes could be" (305). When he

attempts to carry on his father's traditions by denying Ida a share of his inheritance, he remembers his Black mammy and mistress. He owes more to them for shaping him than to his father. He reclaims Ida and begins a new legacy by saving himself first. Jones says that with Clayton's character, Campbell answers the question of white liberal inaction. About his decision, she says, "Campbell does not sentimentalize Clayton's decision. She makes clear that his father's death has made Clayton's choice far easier and that Clayton's silence until his father's death has insured him an inheritance that leaves him financially secure" (173). But Jones also sees the cost to Clayton that addresses both race and class. He loses his Black mistress and his boyhood girlfriend, the white trash Cox sister.

In addition to the march towards civil rights, the novel covers a wide historical era, from cotton fields to catfish farms, from migration to reverse migration, from whites' bombing a church in Birmingham to Blacks' bombing a house in Philadelphia, from Emmett Till to Willie Horton, from lynching to crack cocaine. At novel's beginning, Black characters try to escape north for better opportunities and for life. This is exemplified in the behavior of Ida who cooks and sells to get the toddler Sweetbabe away from the racists who killed Armstrong Todd. In reverse migration, Wydell takes his Armstrong-replacement son, W. T., to the South to save him from gangs and drugs. A place that was death to Black males, a fact bemoaned by Wydell early in the story, has become a place of life and rebirth. Even Sweetbabe, who had escaped to Chicago, returns to Hopewell with his wife and son. He plans to use his degree to teach school and thinks that Hopewell is a better place than gang- and drug-infested Chicago to raise his son. Historical events in the novel mark social and political progress for Blacks. They know

that Kennedy was assassinated because "he was trying to get us some rights" (202). As the 15th anniversary of Armstrong's death approaches, the murder of Black men is being sanctioned by the government in its conflict with Vietnam, and shortly after the war's end, the new Negroes arrive: "As Floyd stood on the bottom step of Mamie's house, he could hear Gerald Ford's nasal twang droning on and on about the end of the Vietnam War, saying that the United States would be accepting Vietnamese refugees" (255). The Black image invades the South: Floyd's daughter listens to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" on the radio, while her mother watches Oprah on television. However, Floyd and Lily are stuck in the past, even as the present crashes into their pitiful lives. For Floyd the highest elected city politician is still a nigger, not human and certainly not a man: "Floyd shouted at his daughter, 'That nigger mayor in Philadelphia bombed a whole house full of niggers'" (284). Louetta, John Earl's wife, complains to Lily in disbelief, "You know how they done give the month of February to the niggers. All over the radio and television, everything is black this and black that. Black History Month. It's like niggers done got to be real people" (291). Louetta tells Lily of the five-part series, [*Eyes on the Prize*], being shown during Black History month, in which Lily will be featured because of Armstrong Todd's murder. Lilly watches, but sees the story as "their story [Black people], like the whole thing belonged to them. Like they got all the heroes and all the victims" (293). A daily dose of Oprah has not healed Lily's low self-esteem issues, yet.

One reason that Lily is unhappy with the Black History program's viewpoint is that she thinks her blues have been omitted from the narrative, her heroism, her victimization. The phrase, your blues ain't like mine, sets up Campbell's comparison-contrast narrative for the Black and white families in the novel's cause and effect pattern.

Because Floyd Cox kills Armstrong Todd, he loses his business, can't find work, and gets a prison sentence for theft. Lily Cox is left to fend for herself and her two children without the skills to do so. She takes handouts from relatives, the church, and finally trades sexual favors for welfare favors. Her son chooses to follow the Southern white male tradition of denying Blacks' humanity despite his exposure to another way of life in the integrated schools and the armed forces. He becomes addicted to drugs and idleness. Lily leaves her husband, after a verbal push from her feminist daughter, who represents a new future for this family, and perhaps for Black families in Mississippi.

Delotha and Wydell Todd's son Armstrong is murdered by Floyd and Lily Cox. Living in Chicago, they are estranged when Armstrong is murdered, but their mutual grief reunites them. They build a successful business, have two daughters in Delotha's attempt to have another Armstrong, and seem headed toward a comfortable middle-class life, until Delotha finally has W.T., the son, who for her, is the new Armstrong. Delotha does not let W.T. have his own identity. He is her "do over." Their lives begin to spiral downward as she focuses all of her attention on keeping W.T. safe from everyone, including his father, but especially the enemy, the white folks. Koritha Mitchell recalls Mamie Till's witness stand confession that she had instructed Emmett on how to behave around Southern whites and the train agent in the novel who tells Delotha that her son would not be in a box if she had taught him how to behave in the South. Mitchell concludes, "When she challenges herself to use personal sacrifice and discipline to protect her next son, she seems unaware of the fact that Armstrong's death did not result from individual failings but from the nation's insistence upon justifying white supremacy by casting black males as sexual predators" (1062). If Armstrong represents Black

manhood lost, then Wydell represents Black manhood regained. Since Armstrong is cut down, someone else has to rise, the same character development that emerges in Baldwin's *Blues*. Delotha's disrespect of Wydell, by not letting him be the man in his son's, or her, life causes him to slip back into alcoholism. He is saved by Lionel, who tells him that Black people, especially Black men, have always had more than one enemy, and in this case, the enemies for W.T. are Delotha, W.T.'s mother, and the environment. With their eyes on white people, Delotha and Wydell miss the gangs and crack cocaine that claim W. T. Wydell's masculinity, which Delotha has surely stripped from him, begins to emerge when W. T. is in trouble. He knows that he was not there for Armstrong, his first son, so, at his cousin's urging, he is there for the last son. The theme of emerging Black masculinity is exemplified in Wydell and will be passed to W. T. There are other shining examples of Black masculinity in Sweetbabe and Wydell's cousin Lionel who has graduated six sons from college, Black men who are head of household, taking care of families and being responsible for their community. Jones says that the contrast of the focused and successful Lionel and the wallowing-in-self-pity Wydell is Campbell's point on "the potential for black 'overidentification with being a victim,' which can lead to feelings of powerlessness" (169). Perhaps after thinking about Wydell's loss and the lack of social services to help him cope with his loss, Jones relents, "However, even as she champions constructive resistance to hardship, she does not downplay or obscure the effects of individual or institutional racism (or sexism or colorism or class elitism, for that matter)" (169). When Delotha admits defeat in her last attempt at parenting, Wydell rescues/kidnaps W. T. and heads south, introducing him to the great blues singer, Muddy Waters, along the way. To rescue and to heal, Wydell

travels the reverse of Muddy's journey on the blues highway, from Chicago to Mississippi, with his son in tow. Like a blues song, the story has excised the pain to end on a note of hope for the offspring of the Coxes and Todds.

One reason for the note of hope for the new generation is Lily and Floyd's daughter who recognizes the class distinction that was part of the Communist rhetoric and will probably break the cycle of hatred and violence represented by her grandfather, father, and brother. Doreen is the new Mississippi that Wydell and W.T. see. Although Floydjunior has been exposed to other world views, Doreen adapts to the changing times without stepping foot out of Hopewell, Mississippi. Jones attributes Doreen's attitude to her association with Blacks. Floydjunior would have had the same association, but Jones does not account for it. She says, "The lower-class white men, Floyd Cox and his son Floydjunior, are not as successful in altering their attitudes towards race and race relations as Doreen and Clayton because they never see beyond their own point of view" (172). In addition to having a progressive world view, Doreen is Campbell's feminist voice. She left her abusive husband, raising her two daughters on a meager salary from hand-breaking work at the catfish farm that, for her, beats welfare and improves her daughters' perception of her. She rescues her mother from her father's brutality and the repressive attitudes of the 1950s, which is a generational struggle in gender identification. In their discussion of the alcoholic and abusive Floyd, Lily thinks that "us women just have to put up with it as best we can and learn to stay out of their way" (285). Doreen tells Lily, "That's bullshit, Mama" (285). The 24-year-old inherited her mother's beauty, but not her doormat mentality. She asks Lily, "Hasn't he made your life a living hell already? All that meanness he got inside of him, all that ugliness he can't control. What

do you think he's gon' do with it? He will kill you. Just like he done that boy" (285-86). She knows that her brother is also taking advantage of the welfare-dependent Lily and tells her, "Mama. Mama. You done had faith in the wrong men your whole life" (286).

Doreen also understands the race versus class issue. She reveals, "New Plantation is treating all of us like shit, Mama. I'm in the same boat as the niggers. I ain't scared of being raped by Willie Horton, Mama. I'm scared of not having medical benefits" (325). Lily should also recognize the same boat because she has to trade sexual favors to a government official for welfare benefits. When Doreen expresses to her mother that Reagan's trickle-down economics are not trickling down to her and that she would have "been better off with Jesse Jackson for President" (290), Lily almost does a Southern white woman swoon, but, unlike her mother, Doreen sees poor, not white, because "that goddamn Reagan don't give a good goddamn if you ain't rich" (290). Doreen explains her world view that is so different from her family's to a mother who thinks that working with Blacks is making Doreen crazy:

> Mama, either I work with them or I get in the welfare line with them, and you know how I feel about that. I was raised around here, and even though I went to school with them, I always felt like they was different from white people, like I was better than they were. Hell, I was raised on that feeling, and I'll probably take it to my grave, but Mama, you know one thing: It's getting to where I just can't afford thinking like that no more. Them feelings just ain't practical when you work at the New Plantation. (290)

Doreen's feminist ideology transfers to her workplace, the New Plantation, when she joins the collective bargaining power of Black women at Ida's. She is excited by the possibilities: "There's gon' be some changes made at New Plantation. The sisters are coming on strong" (295). Recognizing Ida, a Black woman, as "kind of our leader" (295) shows that Doreen is not too immersed in the past to follow and that although white, she is affected by the same issues as Black women, a realization which causes her to develop a bond with them, a sisterhood. Lily recognizes the new woman: "'I can't believe you come outta me, Lily said, shaking her head. 'You got such gumption'" (295).

Jones says that Campbell received critical scorn for her happy ending. "Campbell would more likely term her happy ending utopian rather than unrealistic, for the social changes she orchestrates in her novel do not come totally out of the blue, even though they may not exactly match current southern realities" (171). Campbell's characters show the progression of race and class in the South and the need for further work. While some characters are working together, despite race, there are some who hold onto the racist attitudes of the 50s. More than likely, Campbell's fiction reflects the polemical responses of the nation. For example, it was 2006 when Sean Bell was shot to death by a hail of bullets fired from the guns of New York City cops on the dawn of his wedding, and it was 2008 that the young Brandon McClelland in Paris, Texas, was dragged behind a pick-up truck of whites until his body flew apart, a couple hundred miles from Jasper, where James Byrd had been dragged in a similar manner in 1998. Yet, it was also recently, 2008, that Americans, Black and white, sent a Black man to the Oval Office, not to clean it, but to rule the nation from it.

The writer Lewis Nordan says that to promote his latest book he appeared on a talk show that had a Black host and audience. One lady asked him about his next project. He told her without conscious thought that it would be about Emmett Till. He spoke about arriving at that answer: "I reached down to the core of myself for something substantial to answer her with. What I found there was Emmett Till. As soon as I spoke his name, I knew that I had found a buried chunk of my self's permanent foundation, the granite cornerstone of something formative and durable and true" (Nordan "Growing Up" 6) A year later, Nordan sent *Wolf Whistle* to his publisher. Research reveals many portrayals paying homage to Emmett Till, each more reverent than the last, many from the Black artists' point of view. Nordan, however, says that his novel "is the white story of Emmett Till" ("An Interview" 5). He claims to have been haunted by the white boy who discovered Till's body: "Still, I wonder who he was, what became of him, how his life was changed" (Nordan "Growing Up" 3). In *Wolf Whistle*, Nordan characterizes the white population of Arrow Catcher, Mississippi, to show how Till's death affected them, in mostly positive ways. Yet, he seems to be reckless with the image of Till, one that Black artists have claimed control of for themselves. What is troubling about his tragicomedy is that the comedy becomes apologist's literature, seemingly making light of the tragedy.

In his hands, Nordan's characters become sympathetic buffoons, who pull off the murder of the century in a comedy of errors. The trigger man, Solon Gregg, is a professed criminal and a closet homosexual. He talks about his criminal activities in New Orleans, where he assaults homosexuals for their clothes, money, and fellatio skills. When he awakens from his drunken stupor, he cannot tell what has happened; he has only the

spoils of his crime and the evidence of the sex. Readers hear of him before they met him. His son Glenn tries to burn him in his bed. Solon escapes with minor burns to his scalp, but Glenn is burned horribly and only waits for the mercy of death. Solon's wife is so battered that she can only speak by thinking of Christmas and Santa Claus. His oldest daughter, Wanda, has sold her 15-year-old self to a 44-year-old farmer in Missouri. When Solon enters the house, Wanda is "paralyzed with fright" (74). He has no clue of what happened to Glenn, but after cuddling his youngest children and being shown his dying son, he plays his guitar for Gregg and is joined by the family in an impromptu jam session, playing "'Bo Peep', the music of a black man named Blue John Jackson, who lived just a mile down the road" (76). This is one side of Solon, a side that even caused Nordan to pause, momentarily, and reflect: "As the book got ready to print, I thought, you know, this is possibly volatile. This gives certain humanity to the evil villain, who murders a black child, and so on. I wondered whether that wouldn't seem like excusing him . . . or whatever" (qtd. in Pollack 192-93). In another interview, Nordan says that he feels "love and pity and compassion" for "Solon Gregg, the racist, homophobic murderer" (qtd. in Pollack 193). The other side of Solon Gregg is racist. He freely uses the term "nigger" to refer to Blacks. He does not think that Blacks should have the same rights that he has or should be given a privilege that is denied him. So he is affronted by Sally Ann Montberclair offering the offending Bobo, the Emmett Till character, a ride. He thinks that he should be riding in her Cadillac because "It'd be okay with Solon if the niggers out on the porch got the idea that him and Miss Sally Anne were together, friends, you know" (33). He also marches into Uncle's home to get Bobo, hits Bobo in the head, and kills him. At the trial, he threatens Uncle in front of all the witnesses.

Despite his racist personality, Solon seeks the approval of Black males in his attempt to impress them with his wooing skills, and the focus of his racism appears to be more opportunistic than keeping Blacks in their place.

After seeing Glenn's state, Solon wants to kill his entire family, except maybe Wanda who is getting married. More of Nordan's characterization allows readers to view a history of violence and abuse from Solon's father, who regularly sexually abused Neat, Solon's sister. Neat ran off to a nigger pimp and now has a nigger baby. Solon, "the racist," is willing to accept his nigger kin, however, maybe bake him a cake, and have a conversation with the nigger pimp, if he can think of anything to talk to him about, perhaps dancing, a popular conversation piece with niggers. All of this history makes Solon more sympathetic and unrealistic as a hardcore 1955 racist, and the characterization makes Nordan an apologist for racism. It appears that Solon's comical idiocy justifies his racist attitudes and deadly assault. As Solon contemplates how he will kill everyone with his .25, Poindexter (Dexter) Montberclair enters, tells Solon his wife troubles, and offers Solon a thousand dollars, his El Camino, and his German Luger to kill Bobo. The "racist" is momentarily confused by this. After hearing about Sally Ann's sexual infidelity with the church's musical director, Solon thinks that Dexter surely means that he should kill the choir director, even though Solon has "always admired the way that young man looked, and talented, too" (116). One can only guess at which talent Solon is complimenting. Quickly, Solon catches on to the plot and makes plans for the murder of his family and the wedding gift of a thousand dollars to Wanda. When he confronts Bobo at Red's, Solon is not asserting the Southern white male code of chivalry and protection of white women; he is trying to impress the men in Red's, Blacks

included, by flirting with the half-naked Sally Anne, thereby affirming his heterosexual identity. Even when he tells Dexter about Sally Anne's crossing of the racial divide, he does not do so from the racist code of Southern white male behavior; he is looking to get paid. Complex characterization allows for multiple character traits, but Solon seems to be driven by finances, not the racism of deep hatred for Blacks that men in his class possessed.

Dexter, the accomplice, is the walking wounded, drowning his troubles in alcohol. He is the planter class who uses the overseer class, Solon, "to keep our niggers in line" (118). He does not want to dirty his hands with the business that requires niggers, so he acknowledges his need for people like Solon. Right now, Dexter's problem appears to be a wife who does not love or respect him. His male pride has been wounded with his wife's affair, especially with a known homosexual. He wants to hurt her, but instead he latches on to Bobo, the Chicago nigger who has the nerve to carry pictures of white women, maybe of his wife even, if Solon is right. Dexter asserts the Southern white male proprietary code. He tells Solon, "Carry that picture around with him was as much as saying he owned that girl. Not just fucked her, Solon, owned her, like a wife" (119). So Dexter sentences Bobo to a beating: "That's what irks me so bad. That's what lets me know that this can't be allowed to stand unpunished" (119). It is his jealousy, however, fueled by Solon's innuendos, that compels him to change the whipping sentence to a death sentence, so he accompanies Solon to Uncle's to get Bobo and hits him when Solon makes a positive identification. As soon as he sees that Bobo's picture is of the movie star, Hedy Lamarr, Dexter quickly abandons his kill-a-nigger mindset, and Solon puts

him out of the car. Unlike reality and other authors' characterizations, Dexter does not sustain the code. He quickly abandons racist ideology for his own miserable existence.

Other characters who propel the plot are not villainous. Alice Conroy opens and closes the novel. She is an elementary school teacher pining for her married college lover. Meanwhile she sacrifices herself to care for her uncle and his family. She is interested in giving her students an interactive education, so they go to the murder trial, where she and the children identify with the oppressed, not the oppressor. One critic sees Alice's behavior as the access and privilege of whites because she takes the few seats reserved for Blacks (Pollack 199). She is attuned to Bobo; she sees his dead body in a raindrop, although she has never met him. She longs for a mojo to ward off the impending evil haunting her. Alice's Uncle Runt is an alcoholic, whose wife has abandoned him. He knows that Bobo has crossed the racial divide, so in the rain he attempts to locate a person and house that he has never seen, to do what, we do not know. But he seems compelled to do something. Sally Ann Montberclair, the Carolyn Bryant figure, represents the historical white woman who has been so glorified that she is worth a man's life. She may be, but in this narrative, the white woman does not seem to know that. First, she does not hear what Bobo says; she only knows that he said something, to which the white men react. Then, she saves him. Rather than leave him there to face the men, she tells him to go and get in the back of her Cadillac, which preserves the slave/Black code, somewhat. There is no present or flashback narrative that says what happened after she drove away with Bobo. Readers do know that he made it home because Solon and Dexter pick him up there. The Black man-white woman narrative does not enter the courtroom and is only sparsely in the entire narrative. Yet, this is a major discourse during 1955, the

central idea driving white resistance to integration. Southern born and raised, Lerone Bennett, Jr. reports on the South's reaction to the Brown decision. He says that the White Citizens Council organized in Indianola, Mississippi, another Delta town, to fight the government order to desegregate. The Council included some of the middle-class and upper-class whites or what Bennett called the "white-collar Ku Klux Klan" (376). He quotes the Yale-educated circuit judge Tom Brady:

> when a law transgresses the moral and ethical sanctions and standards of the mores, invariably strife, bloodshed and revolution follow in the wake of its attempted enforcement. The loveliest and purest of God's creatures, the nearest thing to an angelic being that tread this terrestrial ball is a well-bred, cultured Southern white woman or her blue-eyed, golden-haired little girl. (376-77)

Nordan would have certainly broadened the discussion with his white male perspective.

So Sally Ann does not symbolize the Southern white female, the icon of delicate sensibilities and magnolia blossoms. In her article, Harriet Pollack defines shape-shifting by including Giuseppe Arcimboldo's 1566 painting *Wasser*. The painting includes animal and human features. Viewed from one way, the painting reveals the animal shapes, and from another, it reveals the human shapes. What one sees depends upon one's perspective. Pollack lists two reasons for being interested in Nordan's shape-shifting: one is "to consider its usefulness in the analysis of whiteness and of racism, especially as it denies, challenges, and undercuts rigid boundaries—conceptual construction that segregation fetishizes with ideas about purity and the danger of border crossing" (179). She is also "interested in the service shape-shifting performs in the expiation of the

author's guilt and regret in national and personal history—dually triggered by the experience of the death of Emmett Till, national son, and by Nordan's own personal loss of two sons, one by suicide" (179). She says that "Nordan's comic voice creates grotesque humor. The grotesque is a form that is about shape-shifting" (180). Another picture, "The lynching of Rubin Stacey," illustrates the grotesque. A young white girl is smiling at the hanging Black body. "Similarly, Nordan's grotesque humor shifts between the absurdity of and the prevailing horror of cultural circumstance and national trauma" (181). Claiming the shape-shifting "strategic," Pollack says that Nordan changes the historical details and the principal characters in the Till case (179). One change is making Sally Ann Montberclair the wealthiest woman in town and a feminist. Much to the men's delight, and subsequent embarrassment, Sally Ann walks into the store, half-naked, and asks for tampons. Pollack says:

> Sheltering the emblematic female—the lady embodying all the graces of the class system of the South—and protecting her (the woman and the class system) is a discourse used to justify, warrant, and excuse the restriction and brutalization of African American men. Lady Sally Anne Montberclair, however, is not a woman to invite or even allow protection. (185)

Sally Ann is no shrinking violet; she is a steel magnolia who intuits the situation in Red's and takes control, thereby removing a Black child from the harassment of white men.

Other characters appear deeply affected by Bobo's death. Roy Dale is Runt's oldest son. He is angry about his mother's leaving, his father's profession (gravedigger), and his testicular imperfection. Yet, he hangs out with the blues singers at the Rage

Gage's barbershop, making music and making sense of the world. When Sweet or Sugar finds Bobo's body, Roy Dale takes part in the nigger jokes that follow, until one classmate, Smoky Viner, tells them that they are wrong for making fun of a murdered boy. Roy Dale shoots him in the head with a blunted arrow, immediately apologizes, and seeing what he is capable of, throws away his one steel-tipped arrow. Laughter is a coping mechanism to cover embarrassment, to ease tension, to hide discomfort, nervousness, fear, or uncertainty. Nigger jokes, however, shape attitudes and public policy about race. Pollack explains further:

> Laughter can be release or escape; it can expose and subvert. Laughter can transform. But laughter can also be the problem—it can signify willingness to callously turn horror into cartoon, to obscure behavior that should cause outrage. And Nordan shows us that laughter can be a testimony of membership in the clan of whiteness, reinforcing apartheid boundaries. (182)

One character says that we are guilty and part of the problem. Pollack adds, "And Nordan tells us this while, page after page, he is making us laugh our heads off uneasily and provokingly and guiltily at unreasonable and absurd class, gender, and race violence and vulnerability" (183). Her comment explains the grotesque and places the boys' laughter at the murdered Bobo at the site of the picture with the little white girl smiling at the hanged Black body. Perhaps this was the white response to Emmett Till's murder. Coach is so affected by Bobo's death that he wants to reclaim his before-leg-loss life. After he loses his leg in the Korean War, he gives away everything service-related, including his Purple Heart. Now, he says that Bobo's death has affected him so that "I want every durn

thing I ever lost" (273). White change is abrupt; it does not take 10, 20, or 30 years to realize the impact of a Black boy's murder on them. They quit drinking; they take care of family; they change their names.

Nordan's portrayal of Emmett Till's killing is also troubling. After Solon puts Dexter out of the car, he begins to tell Bobo about his life, as if they are friends. He tells him about his son's accident, his daughter's impending nuptials, and his need to boil peanuts in brine. In this male-bonding scene, Solon talks about going fishing, which is so appealing that Solon plans a fishing expedition with Bobo. The male bonding is all on Solon's part; Bobo never utters a word. Solon admits that "he liked the boy, now that he'd done spent some time talking with him, getting to know him" (170). Part of Bobo's silence can be attributed to his escape, which makes Solon feel real foolish for talking to himself. It is night and raining very heavily, but Bobo manages to find Solon's discarded .25 and shoot Solon twice. Solon fires back just before he passes out. When Solon regains consciousness and gets out of the El Camino to see what has happened, he then realizes that he has killed Bobo and seems genuinely perturbed about it. He sees one eye hanging from Bobo's head and a hole in his shoulder. This is self-defense. Even though Solon picked up Bobo with murder-for-hire intent, the readers hear that he has changed his mind. In fact, he has to constantly repeat the white male code, trying to keep himself engaged in murderous intent. He throws the money away and intends to let the little nigger go. Even though Bobo is within his rights to use any means necessary to escape, Nordan plants the idea of self-defense. Solon shoots at someone who is shooting at him, which is certainly a risk for Nordan, but Pollack also explains this shape-shifting. "The damaged child attacks the problem and dies, but his death opens a wound. Emmett Till

died, yet his death attacked the culture of whiteness, wounding it" (190-91). Pollack lists several more children who die for the cause, claiming, "This is another master narrative in the civil rights movement history—the deaths of children exposing adult behavior" (191). Symbolically, in the novel, the powerful wounding does not occur. Solon, like the Till killers, is acquitted, never to be heard from again. Some of the characters change their ways, but they have sown seeds of racism that crop up with the new breed that hangs at Red's, the ones who, according to Runt, are unaffected by tragedy. Pollack also sees the racist tradition continued. She says, "Nordan, not overreaching the idea of reform, balances these guilty/atoning/transforming fathers with those who don't change" (99). And when the changed are silent, those who don't change rule the society. Nordan is historically accurate until the killers leave Uncle's house because after then no one knows, except for the paid article that the killers gave to *Look* magazine, detailing the murder (Huie 205-208). To fill in the gaps, Nordan constructs an "eye" witness report. Bobo's hanging eye relates Solon's actions with the cotton gin, the tying, and the throwing of the body in Roebuck Lake. All of these details are from the demon eye, which does not represent Bobo's point of view since Nordan claims that it is the only one missing from the narrative. Vivian May explains what happens when the Emmett and Mamie Till figures are de-centered from the narrative in her article about Brooks' narrative poem. The narrative becomes a white story, which, of course, Nordan admits. Blacks merely figure in the narrative to reflect white characters' heroism, or lack thereof, in response to Blacks' suffering (102). Looking critically at the negative ways that Blacks are used in white literature, Toni Morrison makes this point in *Playing in the Dark.* Although many critics claim that Blacks have had no effect on much of American

literature, Morrison claims that this assertion can in no way be true because in the creation of the new white man in American, the Black presence was needed in American literature to provide definition of and contrast for white characters (69-90).

In the "Notes for *Blues*," Baldwin explains Lyle's likability in town by saying that "no man is a villain in his own eyes" (6). Yet, Baldwin establishes the white racial hatred with the kitchen conversation of Lyle's friends and acquaintances. Campbell lets the talk of the Cox killers, consistent in its tone of racial hatred, make the racists' point. Given the characterization and the portrayal of the murder in *Wolf Whistle*, however, there is no room for the violent racism that occurs at the trial. After hearing painful childhood memories and witnessing bumbling criminal activities, the readers are unprepared for the abruptness of racism similar to Baldwin's, or Campbell's, or Bull Connor's. First, we hear of the prosecutor's concern for Uncle's safety. He cautions, "Uncle, put your grief aside and find yourself a hiding place. We need you alive for this trial" (220). Alice describes the courtroom and the whiteness. She reports, "All that anger, all that white hatred, rage, a still, sweating, stinking, brooding, engorged, buildingful of it, absences large enough, solid enough, to build furniture upon. Uncle could feel it" (227-28). To alleviate his feeling of isolation, Alice yells from the segregated balcony, the colored section, "We are here! We colored people are behind you!" (231), an identification that refutes Pollack's point about privilege and access (199). Also threatening to the diminutive Uncle (Fig. 4) is Sheriff Trippett, the Paul Bunyunesque sheriff, who politely speaks to all, calling them by name, including, "Mawnin', niggers!" (236). Cloyte Murdock Larsson, a Johnson Publishing reporter at the 1955 trial, disputed Sheriff Strider's testimony about not being able to racially identify Till's body, by reminding the

court that the sheriff had ordered Till's body to a Black funeral home. She reports her initial reaction to him:

> Standing in the entrance to the courtroom, like the anointed defender of the unreconstructed South, he rested his right hand meaningfully on his gun as he saw the members of the Black press approach. Malevolently aware that we could do nothing except accept his insult, swallow our rage and go on, he said with a poisonous smile, "Mawnin', niggers!" (56)

On the fictional witness stand, Uncle tells the prosecutor that he is afraid, that his life has been threatened every day, and that in his 64 years he has "never pointed [his] finger in a white man's face" (248). Shortly thereafter, when the prosecutor asks Uncle for the identification, readers are unprepared for Solon's vitriolic, profanity-laced threats: "You better not point your nigger motherfucking finger at me, you nigger motherfucker nigger motherfucker motherfucker motherfucker motherfucker! Oh Christ, you goddamn nigger, you better not!" (255). Racist for sure, but this is a character who has warmed up to the idea of his nigger kin and is almost tempted to sit down and break bread with Uncle and Auntee. His appointment to kill his family hurried him along. Even with an African parrot shitting down his back in accusation of guilt, Solon is set free, along with Dexter. That is the end of their story. But the town's white citizens are set apart from Solon's behavior by their reactions to and changes because of the "local horror" (262).

After selling the town of benign, good-old-boy racism to readers, Nordan makes an about face at the trial, but before the trial there are indications that the narrative is set in the Jim Crow South, we assume during historical time, 1955, even though Nordan does not say and even though there are references to the Gulf Coast's slot machines and *duh*

expressed with a question mark, a current slang indicating obvious stupidity. They congregate on Red's porch to play the blues, but Black men know their limitations. The "sixty-year-old colored shoeshine boy" (29), Rufus McKay, after being invited to have sex with himself by Roy Dale, a young white boy, says, 'See how this piece of trash talk to me? What if that little Chicago nigger be talking trash like that?" (96). Yet, because Roy Dale is allowed to sit in on Black talk rituals and to practice the blues music, readers get the impression that McKay is merely sharpening his signifying skills on Roy Dale and hazing him, despite McKay's persistence: "Black chile talk to a white man like this little piece of trash be talking to me, I hate to think what be done happen" (97). At the same time that McKay is criticizing the racial construct, he is putting Roy Dale in his place, signifying, the Black verbal art of talking about a person to his face. On a more literal note, the same type of discussion about white-dominance and superiority occurs when Auntee and Uncle have their intimate moment. In reply to Blue John Jackson asking him what he did to aid Bobo, McKay replies, "What I ain't did is kill nobody. I ain't kill no white boy for telling me to go fuck myself. That's the difference between a white man and a nigger" (99). McKay signifies on white males who escalate racial violence because of Black ritual talk. Moreover, in addition to Dexter needing Solon to control his niggers, Dexter asserts white male patriarchy over Black lives when he explains about the many Blacks in the courtroom. He says, "Ninety-five percent of them's not even ours. Our niggers is out picking cotton and tending to they own bidness" (233). Dan Wakefield reports a similar occurrence in the Sumner courtroom in 1955: "A red-necked deputy whose pearl-handled pistol showed beneath the tail of his sportshirt explained that the 'dressed-up' Negroes were strangers. 'Ninety-five per cent of them's not ours,' he said.

'Ours is out picking cotton and tending to their own business'" (121). The threat to Black masculinity is present in the language as Bobo goes from a little "spote" (sport) to a big buck to Sally Ann's sexual partner to a nigger with no right to have pictures of white girls or a wallet. But again, this attitude is from a man trying to get paid by fanning the flames of jealousy, fueling them with the oldest taboo in the South, Black men (boys) and white women. Solon eggs Dexter on: "Just think about Sally Anne sitting down on that little nigger's face, her pitcher up in his wallet like it is" (131). Evidence that the racism is benign occurs at how quickly Dexter abandons his kill-a-nigger mentality, at how Solon wants to associate with his nigger kin, and at how whites are completely in tune with blues singers before B. B. King crossed over. These examples do not bring to mind attack dogs, or clubs, or fire hoses, or men in sheets with guns. No one even mentions desegregation, a flint for the Till killing.

In an interview, Nordan replies to a question about his fictional vision. He says that he creates "a magical landscape just askew of the real historical universe" ("An Interview" 1-2). The magical realism probably contributes to the benign racism effect, even though it does not have to be so. Toni Morrison, for example, masterfully integrates magical realism in 1988's *Beloved*, a novel that reopens the public discourse about slavery. The title character weaves the historical present with the past cruelties of slavery so well that the other characters wonder if she existed in reality or in spirit. Nordan has talking pigeons who narrate part of Bobo's white-woman trespass because most of the characters in Red's missed it or ignored it. The buzzards, dating back to the Civil War and named for "past and future governors and Senators of the sovereign state of Mississippi" (69), communicate their disdain for the South. Runt's parrot steals the trial

show as he shits down Solon's back in the courtroom. Alice sees a Black boy's feet sticking out of the river in a raindrop on her sleeve as she passes the Montberclair mansion. She acknowledges magic, wanting a mojo to keep evil at bay. The description of some of these incidents is funny, too funny for the serious murder of the century. The humor distracts from the message. Nordan seems to forget what he has created. He says, "Even those private things that I made up about the family [the Till family figures] are grounded solidly in 'real world' possibilities . . . where there is no room for caricature or anything unearthly" (Nordan "Growing Up" 5). Yet, the narrator says:

> The demon eye, hanging from its socket down Bobo's cheek, saw a young schoolteacher. She was walking home from school, her heart filled with sadness. In this woman's heart Bobo saw the pain of hopeless love, he saw Solon's child disfigured in his bed, he saw the Spanish moss in the trees outside a Mexican mansion. He saw Alice Conroy see his own dead body in a raindrop. He saw a crystal ball, lost in the depths of Swami Don's Elegant Junk, light up with blue light and an image of things to come. He saw a mojo waving good-bye, one tiny black finger at a time, *good-bye, dear Bobo, we'll never forget you, you'll live forever in our hearts.* (180-181)

A demon eye that tells what happens to its dead body and sees places and people that Bobo did not see in life seems "unearthly." So, Nordan treats Bobo, the Emmet Till figure, reverently but everything around him irreverently? That seems hardly the setting for a homage that Till deserves.

As with other artists, Nordan's portrayal of the sexual Emmett Till deals with Black masculinity. In Till's case, he expressed it and was killed for it. Nordan's character does not differ from other narratives. However, Nordan characterizes the 64-yer-old Uncle as a sexual being. When the killers approach his cabin, he and Auntee have just shared a tender, intimate moment. Solon enters, and Uncle tries to save Bobo by offering him up for the lesser of two evils. Auntee challenges the man that she just enjoyed in her bed. She asks Uncle, "Is that all you can say? Is that the onliest words you ever learned to speak in this world?—you'd be satisfied with a whupping?—that's it?" (140). Auntee assumes Uncle's role as man, head of household, and thinks that she may be able to reach Solon on some sensory level without challenging his masculinity, as certainly a Black man would. She becomes what Cleaver and Hernton characterize as the woman that Black males hate, the aggressive Black female, castrating her man (Hernton 139). Auntee recalls her slave ancestors: "Auntee Reena say slave she have to do all manner of things with a man you hate, slave do, jess staying alive . . . Auntee was just about to break bread with her grandbaby's killer. Was, if this didn't work. Seems like to Auntee she still just a slave. Just owned by some man" (142). Auntee knows that Auntee Reena would consider feeding a man easy compared to what she and other slave women had to do to appease white men, including using their bodies. Age probably prevents Auntee from thinking of her sex appeal to Colon; however, the food offering does not work. Again, Uncle falls back on stereotype before the superior white male, offering, "Let me give him a whuppin, I'll give him a whuppin he won't forget" (144). Solon ignores the Uncle stereotype, and acting as Cleaver's Omnipotent Administrator (182), leaves with Bobo.

Like Baldwin's Meridian, Uncle reclaims his manhood in the courtroom. Nordan portrays Uncle's actions as heroic in the face of "all that white and miserable hatred, as ancient and impersonal as geology and fear" (228). Screwing his courage to the sticking place, Uncle points to the killers, just as Emmett Till's Uncle Moses did. Fiction and history blur. Reflecting in her 1986 article, Larsson says that "[She] remember[s] him as a brave man whose finger never shook when, in that hostile courtroom, he pointed out Milam and Bryant" (57). Larsson's memory serves her well. In 1955, Roi Ottley reports the same: "old Moses Wright did one of the bravest things a Negro in the Delta could do, and, in the process, probably spent the hardest hours in the hardest life for a human in the United States. He was badgered and mocked, threatened and insulted. Yet he still clutched the truth—Bryant and Milam had kidnapped young Till" (132-33). Uncle has to do something that Black males had been forbidden to do on pain of death. Having to move to Chicago, Uncle strikes off the chains of Jim Crow South and embraces the change that he himself has begun. He is not the only Black male in the novel who knows that his behavior falls short of the masculine identity that white males take for granted, even the young ones. One example is the blues session in which McKay keeps the sting of a white child's insult in the foreground of the music.

The tone of the novel seems irreverent, too jive and hip, trying to communicate the rhythms of Black talk. Perhaps Nordan's bird shitting on the defendant is his imagining the carnival-like atmosphere of the real trial. Maybe Nordan wants the audience to see that 1955 Mississippi did not take racism and child killing seriously. Yet, Nordan claims seriousness in his essay: "Emmett (Bobo, in the fiction) and his family are the moral, emotional, psychological, life-affirming core of this novel, which a reader may

trust to be permanent, and around which all the rest of the world may go mad" (Nordan "Growing Up" 5-6). On the contrary, Alice Conroy appears to be the core of the novel. Despite the character ensemble, she begins and ends the narrative, and Nordan offers a sense of hope for the future when she and Sally Anne glance in the crystal ball in Swami Don's Elegant Junk, the same crystal ball that the demon eye sees. This hope is symbolized by a name change, a new way of looking at something familiar. Runt tells everyone to call him Cyrus, his given name, and in a very comical scene, reminiscent of Abbot and Costello's "Who's on First," Coach calls him Runt. Runt says call me Cyrus. Coach calls him Runt. Runt responds appropriately in the conversation but reminds Coach to call him Cyrus. Coach gets frustrated, thinking that he is calling Runt Cyrus. This goes on for several pages before Coach can get the hang of the new name. Perhaps this stand-up comedy routine symbolizes another name transition, from nigger to Negro, with the new white attitudes.

Before hope is realized, however, Nordan's sympathetic caricatures work hard to make palatable the racist ideology of the 1955 South, with bumbling, incompetent whites, who pull off a killing, but only in a comedy of errors. Yet, Nordan claims other emotions: "*Wolf Whistle* is in some ways an angry book. I still have a hard time talking about my upbringing in the South without a certain anger rising up in me. I feel angry sometimes that I was limited in these ways—although it's nobody else's fault—that I was put in a position of treating a whole race of people like peasants, like animals" ("An Interview" 4). Nordan is apologizing for institutionalized racism. Perhaps the tension between deadly racism and buffoonery can be explained by a stanza from Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "The Chicago *Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock." In 1957, two years after

Emmett Till, the reporter's mission is to see what kind of people would verbally and physically assault 14- or 15-year-old school children, historically known as the Little Rock Nine who integrated Central High School. While there, he sees the white people in the town performing everyday activities, such as watering flowers, burning toast, playing baseball, attending classical music concerts, and rejecting or embracing life, making them appear quite ordinary. The reporter says,

> I scratch my head, massage the hate-I-had.
> I blink across my prim and penciled pad.
> The saga I was sent for is not down.
> Because there is a puzzle in this town.
> The biggest News I do not dare
> Telegraph to the Editor's chair:
> "They are like people everywhere." (lines 42-48)

While Nordan's characters do not quite meet the middle-class existence in Brooks' poem, the idea that their behavior is normal and that they are just everyday people for their time and place comes to mind. Good-natured ribbing and similar values link the characters. All that is missing is for Mayberry's Otis to lock himself in Sheriff Andy's jail after he has tied on one too many.

Toni Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* explores the mythological journey of the hero Milkman Dead: separation, initiation, and return. Separation occurs, when after a few conflicts, the hero leaves home, usually motivated by rich rewards. In initiation, the hero undergoes several tests, escalating in difficulty, his true character emerging with every conquest. After the ultimate battle, he becomes a man, fully grown

into all of his potential and returns home the conquering hero (Milum). In *Song*, Milkman goes on a quest to find gold that his father and aunt, as children, left in a cave near the ancestral home after killing a white man. Macon Dead thinks that the gold is still there and, even though they live a very comfortable middle-class existence, he funds Milkman's expedition to search. As with all mythological quests, the hero finds something other than what he is searching for, usually an intangible, like manhood or an appreciation for family. So it is with Milkman. The first part of his journey begins with separation from his current environment. In Ohio, he lives a selfish existence, caring for and about no one. His best friend, Guitar, does not hold his selfish middle-class life against him; they are friends. But part of Guitar's life remains hidden from his best friend, Milkman. Guitar is part of a group of assassins who, beginning in 1920, kills random whites to even the score for the many blacks who are killed and never receive justice. Once he reveals himself and his mission to Milkman in the 1960s, Guitar explains, "The earth is soggy with black people's blood. And before us Indian blood. Nothing can cure them, and if it keeps on there won't be any of us left and there won't be any land for those who are left. So the numbers have to remain static" (158). The group, the Seven Days, has a man assigned to each day of the week. If a Black is murdered by a white on Saturday and no justice is received, then the Saturday man has to kill a random white in approximately the same manner. If a Black is killed on Sunday, then the Sunday man, Guitar, gets the assignment. His current assignment is to avenge four little girls in Birmingham.

Like Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church's bombing in 1963, Emmett Till is also a

historical figure, whom Morrison imagines into the idea of the Days. Because of their Mission Statement, the Days, naturally, have to keep up with current events. Milkman argues that the Days should find the guilty and bring them to court. In real life, Bryant and Milan were brought to court for killing Emmett; they were acquitted. In fiction, Guitar explains this point to Milkman:

> You say Jews try their catches in court. Do we have a court? Is there one courthouse in one city in the country where a jury would convict them? There are places right now where a Negro still can't testify against a white man. Where the judge, the jury, the court, are legally bound to ignore anything a Negro has to say. What that means is that a black man is a victim of a crime only when a white man says he is. Only then. (160)

Guitar, the Sunday man, wants "to make a world where one day white people will think before they lynch" (160).

Freddie, the town gossip, tries to connect the dots for Milkman before Guitar's confession. He prompts, "Look here. Remember when Emmet Till was killed? Back in fifty-three? Well, right after that, a white boy was killed in the schoolyard, wasn't he?" (111). Milkman may have forgotten, but he was present in the moment. Having family troubles after an altercation with his father, Milkman comes into Railroad Tommy's barbershop where the Days congregate. At this point, however, in the 50s, the 22-year-old Milkman does not know that they are the Days. He thinks that they are just friends, continuing the oral tradition of barbershop talk. They are listening to the radio report of the death of Emmett Till. "A young Negro boy had been found stomped to death in Sunflower County, Mississippi. There were no questions about the motive. The boy had

whistled at some white woman, refused to deny he had slept with others, and was a Northerner visiting the South. His name was Till" (80). Milkman tries to focus on the ritualized talk about where the murder will appear in the paper, whether Till understood his surroundings, and why "he whistled at some Scarlett O'Hara cunt" (81). Freddie asks, "Acting big down in Bilbo country. Who the hell he think he is?" (81). The answer to Freddie's question and the exchange between the Days is a discussion about Black masculinity, what it means to be a man, and how difficult it is to achieve manhood in a racist society:

> "Thought he was a man, that's what," said Railroad Tommy.
>
> "Well, he thought wrong," Freddie said. "Ain't no black men in Bilbo country."
>
> "The hell they ain't," said Guitar.
>
> "Who?" asked Freddie.
>
> "Till. That's who."
>
> "He dead. A dead man aint' no man. A dead man is a corpse. That's all. A corpse."
>
> "A living coward ain't a man either," said Porter. (81).

After this exchange is another one about the punishment of the killers. Because of the national attention, one customer says that the killers will be caught: "'Catch 'em? Catch 'em?' Porter [a Day] was astounded. 'You out of your fuckin mind? They'll catch 'em, all right, and give 'em a big party and a medal'" (82). The South as a place that sanctions the killing of Black citizens is real in these men's lives. Probably recent emigrants to the North, they recall, "'South's bad,' Porter said. 'Bad. Don't nothing change in the good

old U. S. of A. Bet his daddy got his balls busted off in the Pacific somewhere'" (82). As usual, Black men have to recover from the ongoing assault to their masculinity, so they turn to their verbal skills:

> The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they heard, then those they'd witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. They laughed then, uproariously, about the speed with which they had run, the pose they had assumed, the ruse they had invented to escape or decrease some threat to their manliness, their humanness. (82)

Like the northern relatives who put on the mask when they cross the Mason-Dixie line and Mrs. Till's advice to Emmett to kowtow to Southern white superiority, these men know that the racism against them is real and deadly.

Because the adult Milkman is still in the separation stage of his journey toward manhood, he is impatient and petulant with the men who understandably want to mark the solemn occasion of Till's death. Milkman's family revolves around him and his needs, so he has become self-centered, unconnected with the world around him. His older sister Lena makes him aware of his behavior by defining Black masculinity when he tries to assert himself into their adult lives after ignoring them for years: "Where do you get the right to decide our lives? . . . I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs. Well, let me tell you something, baby brother: you will need more than that. I don't know where you will get it or who will give it to you, but mark my words, you will need more than that" (215).

After dragging Guitar from the discussion at Tommy's to talk about his family conflicts, Milkman is visibly flustered that Guitar would again bring up an unknown victim:

> "I don't know, Guitar. Things seem to be getting to me, you know?"
>
> "Don't let 'em. Unless you got a plan. Look at Till. They got to him too. Now he's just an item on WJR's even news."
>
> "He was crazy."
>
> "No. Not crazy. Young, but not crazy."
>
> "Who cares if he fucks a white girl? Anybody can do that. What's he bragging for? Who cares?"
>
> "Crackers care."
>
> "Then they're crazier'n he is."
>
> "Of course. But they're alive and crazy."
>
> "Yeah, well fuck Till. I'm the one in trouble."
>
> "Did I hear you right, brother?" (88)

Emmett Till's appearance covers only a few pages in Morrison's fiction, but it contributes to an epic discussion about Black masculine identity. Guitar tells Milkman about the Black man's condition: "Everybody wants the life of a black man. Everybody. White men want us dead or quiet—which is the same thing as dead. White women, same thing" (222). Bryant and Milan silenced Emmett Till over the age-old lie of assaulting a white woman.

CHAPTER 4

Popular Culture

In addition to some fiction, popular culture includes public meditations, documentaries, songs, and the new social networking phenomena of blogging, websites, and YouTube. A search for Emmett Till (not including all the variations) on Google yields 214,000 results. In a musical walk through history from Muddy Waters to the British Invasion, Willie Dixon says in 2009's *Cadillac Records*, "stringing up our little bitty boys for whistling at white women," as the iconic photos of the two hanging black men and Till and his mother (Figs. 5, 2) flash across the screen. Some of the people who bring the Emmett Till discussion to popular culture do not discuss him as a trope for sexuality or civil rights. They just want to pay homage to him and talk about the effect of the death photo on their consciousness.

In 2005, Scott Poulson-Bryant published *Hung*. The provocative title is subtitled *A Meditation on the Measure of Black Men in America*, and the cover art has a ruler numbering from 5 ½ to 11 ½ inches. Just as the cover promises, Poulson-Bryant titillates with stories and examples from his life as an Ivy League student and an editor of a publication that he not only co-founded but also named, *Vibe* magazine. While a lot of his evidence is anecdotal, he does enter the scholarly field with a discussion on Black masculine identity with several respected sources, such as Sigmund Freud, James Baldwin, Frances Cress Welsing, and Eldridge Cleaver. There is even a spin on W. E. B. DuBois' racial two-ness. Speaking of life beyond the veil, his metaphor for the color line, DuBois says that Blacks will "ever feel [their] two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,

whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*Souls* 8-9). So it is with Black males, a masculine two-ness, according to Poulson-Bryant. Black men carry the cross of the dual identity of being Black and male, never just male (12). This duality is present in every other group, but becomes a racial signifier in a country that identifies everyone by skin color, rather than nationality.

Poulson-Bryant begins and ends *Hung* with a letter to Emmett Till. These letters frame the discussion of Black masculinity, linking race and sex, concepts that coincide in Poulson-Bryant's consciousness as a white girl chooses him for a sexual partner based upon the myth of well-endowed (hung) Black males. The "Prologue" letter relates the beginning of the author's racial awareness in the old people's talk about Emmett and in the television production of Alex Haley's *Roots*. He says that as he is writing his book, Till is in the news again because the Justice Department has evidence that some guilty people are still alive and can still be prosecuted. Poulson-Bryant addresses Emmett:

> Because you acted like a man. There are many theories about what happened to you that day. But most of them come back to the fact that you were behaving like a man might behave: you whistled at a woman whom you found attractive. And unfortunately you were behaving the way a black man is expected to behave. Sexually aggressive. And toward a white woman! In the South! The racists got their revenge. (3)

Poulson-Bryant introduces the discussion of Black male sexuality because he wants Emmett to know that "times have changed," because "Black men aren't being lynched these days—or so we're told" (3), but Black males are still in the forefront of the discussion about sex and race. In telling Till about progress in our social movement,

Poulson-Bryant begins with the myth about Black male genitalia. He claims that "one creates myths to make one feel better about one's own condition" (171). In this case white men have created the myth about the Black penis to compensate for their own feelings of inadequacy. They more than measure up in terms of power and success, but do not in terms of penis size, which is not about women, but how men measure their own worth. In order to ensure that they are not destroyed by their creation, white men create a new myth of a hung list to replace the old one of the big Black penis. Poulson-Bryant says that white men "weren't trying to create a monster to subjugate. They needed a monster against which to measure their own monstrous actions" (22). The Black body, he says, was used to refine meanings of power and establish "cultural codes and myths of American masculinity" (17). Looking at white males' conflicted emotions of hate and fear, Hutchinson says "In deeply sexist America, the game is still about white male ego, power, and control. Black men are perceived as threats to all" (16). This myth about the big Black penis is both degrading and alluring. Poulson-Bryant gives an example of a friend who feels degraded by the stereotype. Once people discover the size of his friend's penis, then all of his education and intellect are dismissed. He becomes his penis and is ashamed, equating his experience to slavery: "It's like I'm on a slave block or something" (49). With a little more prompting, Poulson-Bryant discovers that ". . . it's the stares of white men that get to him most" (49). This is an old discussion: "Thus we have the age-old dialectic of master and slave, owner and field hand, buyer and bought" (50). For some, the penis becomes engorged with the myths and history of race relations, the size, measuring up or not, being the sole definition of masculinity (51).White men demonize Black men in media because "[they view] black men as competitors and

potential challengers to their power and control" (Hutchinson 103). Yet, the stereotype holds some allure for some Black men. It is not the worst of stereotypes about Black males. If they can manipulate the stereotype to their advantage, it lends them some currency or legitimacy in a sex-obsessed society.

Because race and sex are so pervasive in our society, both Black and white literature enters the public discourse. Poulson-Bryant uses Sula's analysis of everyone's love for a Black man from Toni Morrison's *Sula* to illustrate the allure of the stereotype. Sula claims that everyone loves and worries about a Black man's penis. White women love it so much that they worry themselves into hysteria, looking under their beds and in closets for the sexual predator. White men love the Black penis so much that they cut it off. This "love" obsession appears in Baldwin's *Blues*, when the male characters in Whitetown are whipping themselves into a frenzy about the size of the Black man's penis, remarking that no white woman would be any good for anyone else after being assaulted by a Black man. Hopefully, readers notice in the discussion that the Black woman is not in the same peril. Poulson-Bryant says, "It almost begins to seem like some cultural need, this emphasis on the hugeness of black male genitalia, as if the definition is there to settle the racial minds of both the definer and the defined. And it crosses the color line" (73). This hugeness also aligns with "the white need to cast the black man as supreme sexual aggressor" (64). Talking about the "science" supporting white mental superiority and Black sexual savagery, Hutchinson says, "Since art does imitate life, it was only a matter of time before this pap crept into the literature" (25). In some literature, it is the Black boy who is stereotyped. In *Wolf Whistle* and *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, the 14- and 15-year-olds, Bobo and Armstrong, respectively, are killed because of this

perceived sexual aggressiveness. Too young to commit a sexual offense, they are killed because of their potential to commit one and the myths that persist about Black males. Poulson-Bryant agrees, “Having sex, it appeared to me from knowing my American history, was the ultimate act of the black man, with his ‘superior masculinity,’ the sexual symbol, the plantation-bred breeder, the stud, the rapist” (81). Black authors, from Brooks to Giovanni to Coleman, use the theme of the sexual predator to illuminate the sexual-racial dialectic.

Inevitably, the discourse about Black and white males links penis size to power. Poulson-Bryant claims that in Hollywood, there are two lists: the hung list deals with penis size, and “the list,” which deals with powerful stars who can green light or open a film. There are no Black men on either list. This omission is similar to having a Best Booty list with no Black women on it. According to white racial indexes, unlike Black males and their penises, Black women’s booties are not the seat of their power. Poulson-Bryant concludes, “Putting a black man on the hung list fulfills a stereotype. Not putting one there confirms a lack of power” (104). Poulson-Bryant defines the romantic lead as the man who saves the day and gets the girl. The Black actors are allowed to save the day, but they do not get the girl, unless they are in an urban-marketed film. Poulson-Bryant ties this formula to masculinity. He explains, “Both getting the bad guy and getting the girl are markers of American filmic masculinity in the Hollywood machine” (89). His example is 1993’s *Pelican Brief*, based upon John Grisham’s novel of the same name and starring Denzel Washington and Julia Roberts. Although the novel has a romantic entanglement between the leads, no such entanglement occurs on film. Two of Hollywood’s most beautiful people awkwardly avoid each other in a hotel room.

Poulson-Bryant likens this omission to the censoring of films with Black stars in the early 20th century, when filmmakers made the Black actors' storylines peripheral to the film so that they could be edited out in the South, without affecting continuity (Lena Horne in *Stormy Weather*, for instance). Poulson-Bryant wonders if this is the case still, executives' catering to the racist South. He does not see much social progress from Sidney Poitier to Denzel Washington. If one recalls, Poitier acts with unavailable white women, the nuns in *Lilies of the Field* or a blind one in *A Patch of Blue*. It wasn't until 1967 that Poitier was allowed to entertain the thought of getting the girl in the non-sexualized discussion of race in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Emmett should know that we have progressed enough for the discussion to be flipped. A recent remake in 2005 called *Guess Who* has a Black daughter bringing home a white man, and as with all movies with this mix, the Black woman has to assure all that her white man measures up. The problem with Black male leads is that they are not universal. When Tom Cruise is the romantic lead, he symbolizes Everyman, or what Everyman wishes to be. White men, Black men, Asian men, or Latino men are supposed to identify with this white male. On the other hand, Black men only represent other Black men. If they become universal in their derring-do, they are not universal in their sexuality, making cross-over difficult. In the News & Culture section of *Essence*, number three of the "Ten Things We're Talking About" reports, "An Indiana University study found that marketing was one reason why only 2 of the 30 highest grossing films last year [2010] featured people of color as main characters, adding that whites don't see themselves as the intended audience" (68). Earlier in the text, Poulson-Bryant defines the eracist as someone who will use Black culture to enhance his self-worth; he is not interested in including black people, just their

culture that improves his image of himself. About films, he says, “The eracist will cast the black man as the comic relief or the hard-nosed sidekick or a quirky sexual dynamo but rarely, if ever, as a true leading man” (98). Perhaps Hollywood is slowly moving in this direction because of the “power of popular culture . . . particularly the power it has to define how we learn about who we are” (89).

Calvin C. Hernton wrote in 1965 about the Black man’s temptation. He says that in all media “there is but one incessant symbol: the naked or half-naked white woman” (3). In 2005, the white woman-Black man entanglement is the same discussion of Emmett Till’s era, 1955, but an economic element is added to the sexual and racial elements. Also, the discussion is in a different format. Now the discourse is for sale, as pornography. According to Poulson-Bryant, white males purchase 70% of porn. They are excited about the fictional idea of a black man having sex with what they have deemed too good to be sexualized, the white woman. He says, “a white man can make a display of both his desired sex object *and* the object of his envy” (141). Yet, some of the biggest white female stars will not have sex with the well-hung Black male stars. Poulson-Bryant wonders if this is jealousy of the women’s manager, who may also be their husbands or boyfriends He answers, “So this is about, as it historically has been, protecting the virtue of white womanhood—the sacred object of white male desire, *of everyone’s* desire—from the danger of the big black beast” (143). In the creation of the myth, Hutchinson says that to control Blacks, white planters “needed a myth, one that they could elevate to national hysteria. Black hypersexuality was perfect. They convinced themselves and most whites that those bestial black men with their large propagators were after their dainty white women” (70).

From Jim Brown to Shaquille O'Neal, many black athletes have become actors, which Poulson-Bryant terms as "hypermasculine energy . . . building even higher cultural monuments to the idea of black masculine ideal" (106). Yet it is this high visibility that has allowed for a "high-tech lynching" (Clarence Thomas) of the Black male image. One idea that makes these assaults possible is that athletes, like it or not, are role models. Children look up to them, want to be them, and white people allow this idolatry of sports figures. Poulson-Bryant addresses this interesting pact between Black athletes and white culture in which whites will retain power, but will allow the Supermasculine identity and will even idolize it. In this created identity, Black athletes are no longer Black; they "transcended race" (119), so when they prove to be just human beings, they become victims of an all out media assault, like O. J. Simpson who was allowed to be raceless and was rewarded with a white woman, blonde no less, but became Black during the trial for the murders of Nicole Brown-Simpson and Ron Goldman. Simpson escaped the clutches of the high-tech lynch mob with an acquittal, which began a new discussion about Blacks and the justice system, as Blacks celebrated and whites mourned the verdict. Also, Black males are victims of highly sexualized images. For instance, Magic Johnson became the face of HIV/AIDS; Dennis Rodman was a Super Freak, Michael Jackson a child-molester, and Mike Tyson and Kobe Bryant rapists. Earl Ofari Hutchinson made these connections in *The Assassination of the Black Male Image* in 1994, but, in the cases that involve rape, Poulson-Bryant brings in Baldwin's idea of size and color of the Black male penis. He says that "the concept of 'date rape' . . . took on national prominence with the faces of black athletes attached as poster boys of bad male behavior" (115). Hutchinson agrees, "The point is to show that crimes committed by

black men are often blown up, magnified, and sensationalized for the public" (69). Explaining the difference between race (biological, inherited) and racism (behavior, learned), Hernton says that the mythological representation of the Black man's penis has more to do with its color (racism) than its size (race). We create problems in the way that we behave (racism) towards physical characteristics (race) of Blacks, which denies access and privilege. Thus, racism, a social construct, becomes institutionalized and "*profitable* for the majority of white Americans" (179). Poulson-Bryant's research reveals no discussion of size or color in high profile white cases of sexual assault, such as William Kennedy Smith, because there are no myths of protection, violence, or rupture about the white penis. Used as a means to control, says Poulson-Bryant, "The hypermasculinity of the black male sexual image was ironically an invention designed to emasculate" (124). In other words, says Hernton, the white man has created an image of Black male sexuality that is so monstrous, so fearful that he must destroy it. "To most white people, the black person *exhumes* sexuality. The racist is so full of fear, so twisted sexually that even a young boy like Emmett Till was murdered and mutilated for speaking to a white woman in a department store" (117).

Nothing is more Black and masculine than the Hip-Hop performers. The forerunners of Hip-Hop were rappers, who, according to Poulson-Bryant, rapped about politics, not sex. They updated the social consciousness of the 60s with strong rhythms and beats. Poulson-Bryant says that until LL Cool J, the rappers wore clothes to cover up their objectified bodies: ". . . I've always thought of hip-hop as a way that black men snatched back their masculinity from the clutches of crossover culture" (176). Like the stereotype about penis size being degrading and alluring, these clothes both hide and

reveal. They may be baggy, but this very bagginess allows for most of the pants to hang low enough to reveal designer underwear-clad buttocks. And if the clothes deemphasize the penis, the rappers emphasize it by constantly groping for it. LL Cool J introduced the sexy rapper, explains Poulson-Bryant, but the image makers could not see sex and rap unified. A white rapper who was marketed by the fashion industry opened the floodgates of sexuality in rap music. "The usual boasting and bragging that marked rap music as a black man's place for brothers to get the upper hand has given way to a graphic sexual sensibility that fits right in to the current cultural fascination with sex and sexuality" (183).

Before closing with his letter to Emmett Till, Poulson-Bryant tells readers that "we've come a long way from Emmett Till" because of the images of Black male sexuality in the media (204), but he is not so sure because of the Black male's lack of power, which is a means of still not measuring up. He says in his letter:

> But perhaps you will have the last laugh. Perhaps we all will, however morbid that might sound. Because you are in the news again, Emmett, as I write the words that fill this book. Black men who've felt as haunted by you as I have been have started to recover your dignity, to seek out once again the men who snuffed out your vigorous youth with the power of racism. (209)

Allowing for some social advances, Poulson-Bryant says, "Some things have changed. We've become more a part of the national debate rather than just being the subject of the national debate" (209), and he summarizes the stories of some of his friends, especially his sorrow for the one who felt like a slave. "Dude just wants to be a man. Like you did"

(209). With a verbal hand grasp and chest bump, he closes his letter with the affection that Black males reserve for each other: “Your boy, Scott” (209).

Similar to the social-consciousness of early rappers, folk singers, who were a big part of the hippy tradition of the 1960s, created a socially and politically conscious art, stark in its simplicity. The unadorned voice accompanied by a guitar sang about the social ills of the day, for example, war, poverty, and racism. Two singers paid their respects to Emmett Till in the folk tradition. One was Bob Dylan who wrote and recorded “The Death of Emmett Till” in 1962. The ballad of rhyming couplets follows the story fairly accurately. He says that Till “stepped through a Southern door” (line 1), another place reference that reveals Mississippi as operating outside of the social norm, probably only a little less worse than Alabama. Dylan also introduces the skin color “black” and calls the victim’s name (4). When Dylan questions the why of the killing, his answer of “just for fun” (12) is similar to Brooks’ Mississippi Mother who wanted to get fun from her ballad. Dylan’s youthful talent probably accounts for the illogical details in the next two stanzas. He was 21 years old, when he wrote this song, the same age that Till would have been if he had not been murdered. In the song, Dylan says that the “Two brothers they confessed” (14), but this was to prevent a trial. Yet in the next stanza, he sings, “For the jury found them innocent and the brothers they went free” (19). Dylan is mature enough, however, to accuse white silence for the conditions that permitted the Till murder:

> If you can’t speak out against this kind of thing, a crime that’s so unjust,
> Your eyes are filled with dead men’s dirt, your mind is filled with dust.

> Your arms and legs they must be in shackles and chains, and your blood it must refuse to flow,
>
> For you let this human race fall down so God-awful low! (21-24)

Figuratively, the silent whites are dead. Dylan is either unskilled at metaphors or brilliant because the mixed metaphor of slavery and death works in that being bound in chains and shackles symbolizes a living death in much of Black literature. Dylan's tone is accusatory, referring to the silent whites as "you." Seven years since the death of Till, Dylan says that "the ghost-robed Ku Klux Klan" still operates (26), and nothing will prevent their presence if the silent whites do not act. Dylan calls upon those who can to become socially responsible because "We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live" (28). Here, he is inclusive and part of the solution, using "we" in his concluding stanza. In today's social networking, there is a YouTube video of this song, made in the crude, simplistic style of putting relevant pictures with the music. For example, when he says, "I saw the morning papers" (17), there is a photo of bundled newspapers, perhaps at a newsstand. When he tells the silent whites that they are dead, the death photo of Till (Fig. 4) fills the screen. Another folk artist who wrote about Emmett Till in 1962 and the racism that persisted was Joan Baez, a woman famous for "Blowing in the Wind," a popular 1960s anthem, in which she asks, "How many roads must a man walk down before your can call him a man?" This question is surely applicable to Black males seeking a masculine identity. Like Dylan, Baez's style is unadorned, the simple voice accompanied by the basic guitar. She gives the historical details lyrical voice and sings the refrain for "The Death of Emmett Till":

Emmett Till Emmett Till his name will be a legend

From Chicago to Mississippi to see his Uncle Mose

We won't see little Emmett anymore

No we won't see little Emmett anymore.

Till's name has become legend for a younger generation because of venues such as YouTube that resurrect older artists like Dylan and Baez to keep his spirit alive.

Former Chair and Professor of English at Chicago State (where Gwen Brooks taught), Dr. Donda West had a son with a former Black Panther. The son's name is Kanye West, a producing, songwriting, rapping megastar. Fans can see the influence of the educators and activists in his lyrics that include political and social commentary, irony, and verbal fluency. West's first CD, *The College Dropout*, released in 2004, was a critical and commercial success. On that album, West satirizes his experience from a car crash in 2002 that nearly killed him. With his jaws wired shut, he created "Through the Wire," rapping about his near-death experience. Sampling the chorus and melody of Chaka Khan's "Through the Fire," West tells how bad his accident was by referencing Emmett Till. In a powerful example of Audre Lorde's concept of afterimage, West raps, "And just imagine how my girl feel / On the plane scared as hell that her guy look like Emmett Till." West's use of the death photo (Fig. 4) that is pasted in the collective African American memory provides an immediate image for his audience, Gen Xers and Nexters, people who were born some 20 or 30 years after Till's death. The death photo is what Lorde calls an afterimage in her poem of the same name, in which she asserts that the gruesomeness of the photo affects people long after they have seen it and long after it was taken. West calls upon the collective memory again when he interrupts country

music singer Taylor Swift in her acceptance speech for Best Female Video on the 2009 Video Music Award show. Disagreeing with the academy's choice, West walked on stage, grabbed Taylor's mike, and politely told her that he would let her finish. He then announced to the viewing public that Beyoncé had the best video of the year. The film clip of this interruption exploded into the public discourse (right now over 21 million links on Google). Coming under heavy fire from every pundit and even President Obama, fellow-Chicagoan West said that, like Emmett Till, he was being lynched for assaulting a white girl. People were even more indignant that he would compare his actions to something as sinister as the Emmett Till murder. In what some see as a post-racial society, however, they may have missed his point. Viewed from a historical window, the incident becomes racial. Just beginning her career, Taylor Swift was a young, blonde white girl, and West was an aggressive Black male committing verbal assault. Standing right at six feet tall, somehow, Swift managed to appear vulnerable and intimidated. She needed to be protected from a Black male, America's "universal bogeyman" (Hutchinson 16), and the media embraced her, the way that it embraced Carolyn Bryant and Nicole Brown-Simpson. This media embrace made an emerging talent a megastar, and it vilified a Black musical genius who had made his disruption of award shows as part of the night's entertainment. Arguing against the white feminists, a womanist blogger agrees that "White people used this occasion to let their inner racist out. What they saw was a Big Black Sambo scaring poor little Missy Ann into silence. You cannot have an interaction between Black men and White women without some people absolutely losing their shit" (Martin). Renee Martin also chastises West for using a sacred image. She concludes, "Kanye could have said that he felt racially attacked. He could have said that

he felt that his actions were viewed through a White supremacist lens, but oh no—his highness had to go and compare himself to a poor 14-year-old boy whose life was cut brutally short" (Martin). What Martin fails to realize is the power of the white-controlled media; a Black man who makes his living by manipulating that media could in fact be "lynched," if he publicly "assaulted" a white woman. Like Till, Kanye is "lynched" for his talk, not his touch. O. J. Simpson manipulated the media to the point that he became de-racialized as a gridiron and movie star, until he went to trial for the murder of Nicole Brown-Simpson. *Time* magazine darkened his picture to make him appear more menacing. Johnny Cochran, his attorney, was accused of playing the race card in Simpson's defense. "It wasn't fair for him to be 'black' now after all the years of being allowed to be neutral when it came to racial identification. It wasn't fair to slay the prize of white womanhood after he'd been rewarded with that prize for so many years of service" (Poulson-Bryant 122). Perhaps Tiger Woods would not still be out of the public's favor if his sexual infidelity had not been against his white wife. Also, when Clarence Thomas accused the government officials of a "high-tech lynching," surely he must have thought that some were attacking him for marrying a white woman. He was confirmed as Supreme Court Justice, but Hutchinson thinks that the outcome would have been different had Anita Hill been white. He concludes, "Sexual perversion and black men instantly rattle ugly tremors in the hidden recesses of the collective psyche of many whites" (65).

Another musical performer remembers by wearing a t-shirt in his video "Cadillacs on 22s" in 2005. Banner raps in the sacred-secular tradition that West made popular with "Jesus Walks," using profane language as he asks God to help the Mississippi Streets,

while he walks through raising the dead and saving Black men from nooses. One of David Banner's shirts has R.I.P. Emmitt [sic] Till on the front, which is ironic because the public will not let him rest (Banner). Also on YouTube is a five-minute performance with avant-garde music of jazz, blues, and gospel, a cacophonous improvisational sound with a poem performed from different points of view in the foreground. Dee Alexander sings Mamie Till's perspective. The musical suite is approximately two hours long and at various times is shrill, frenetic, and funky, soulful blues to communicate the raw emotions of the musicians. "UnTill Emmett Till" debuted in Chicago at the Velvet Lounge on the South Side. Howard Reich, art critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, narrates the 2008 clip that was composed by Ernest Dawkins and shot and edited by John Owens.

The renewed interest in 2005 probably resulted from 34-year-old Keith A. Beauchamp who spent nine years researching the Till murder and produced a 70-minute documentary entitled *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*. Jerry Tallmer reviews the documentary for *The Villager*. In the review, he recalls the story and interviews Beauchamp about the making of his documentary. Again there is a compelling example of Lorde's afterimage. After stumbling upon the death photo (Fig. 4) in *Jet* magazine, Beauchamp reveals its effect to Tallmer:

> "That image has stayed with me all my life," says Beauchamp who has spent the past nine of his 34 years researching, witness-chasing, persuading, shooting his Emmett Till film. "I worked with Mrs. Mobley for eight years before she passed away. It took me three years just to convince Simeon Wright [son of Moses Wright] to talk to me. I'm still shooting. This is a never-ending documentary."

Tallmer says that the Beauchamp's documentary caused the Justice Department to reopen the Till murder case, hoping to prosecute some guilty person, similar to the outcome in the Medgar Evers case. So far, no one has been indicted.

Beauchamp's documentary aired on TV One in January 2011. Many of the details of the kidnapping are repeated. However, Beauchamp interviews Simeon Wright, Till's cousin and Uncle Moses' son. He says that Till was "mischievous. Everything was fun to him." This detail illustrates the innocence of Till's offense. The documentary also reveals the problem of asserting a Black masculine identity. Uncle Moses fails to protect young Till; he lets him go, thinking that Bryant and Milan would whip him and bring him back. He waited until dawn before giving up hope. Al Sharpton says that Mamie probably saved the lives of many Black boys by allowing the death photo to be printed. He says that she "made America deal with its ugly racial problem." The picture "visually brought home what a thousand speeches could not bring home." Similar to Giovanni's report in her poem, Beauchamp quotes Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, "because it was a boy . . . they went there; they had to prove that they were superior." While attending the 1955 trial, Mamie Till reports the violent tradition passing to white sons, who were in the window firing cap guns, while the white fathers laughed, and concludes, "not only were Black men in danger but Black children were as well" (Beauchamp).

Poets and authors include Till in their creative work, but the younger generation uses different venues to remember the ultimate offense against the Black community. Devery Anderson has a website devoted to Emmett Till. When he became interested in the murder, not much research had been done. He established a six-year relationship with Mamie Till and constructed an informational website about Emmett, relevant locales and

people. On the “About Me” page, he confesses “that this case was consuming [him] in ways [he] could not explain.” He is currently working on his book about Emmett (Anderson). A blog from the Pop Culture Institute, which has a Facebook link, posted “The Sad Story of Emmett Till,” a brief summary, which invites viewer comments (Morris). A similar site, Pop Culture Moment of the Day has posted a promise: “Emmett Till, we will not forget you.” The author does not want history to repeat itself. Most unusual are the grammar and literary exercises at the end of the promise (Golden). There is even a lesson plan posted by the Los Angeles School District in a PowerPoint, “The Murder of Emmett Till” (“The Murder”). A site called the Murder of Emmett Till lists the depictions in popular culture. Some include a comic book, many of the literary works, some documentaries, and television programs that fictionalized the Till case.

The Internet has removed the barriers to publishing, and people are taking advantage of the freedom by expressing themselves in many formats about the death of Emmett Till. They are protective of the image that appears to be a fresh stimulus and have constructed a makeshift memorial to honor his memory.

CONCLUSION

Milan and Bryant may have murdered Emmett Till, but the boy won't die. Some African cultures believe in the living dead, the ancestral spirits who control behavior in the material world. As long as someone remembers the ancestor's name, he or she remains alive. When Lewis Nordan says that Till will *live forever in our hearts*, he could have added *and in our literature*. Till remains alive because everybody, foreign and domestic, young and old, Black and white, knows his name, even some 55 years later. For those who know him, he represents the many nameless Black men who became statistics in a nation that proclaimed freedom and justice for all. Many were lynched for falling in love with a created, idealized symbol of Southern white womanhood. He also represents the brutality of racism, in which white men were given license by the government and community to accuse, judge, and execute Black males for any attention, real or imagined, to white women. Finally, he symbolizes the Black nation's refusal to sit down and accept white racism's interpretation of the grotesque monster (the death photo; Fig. 4) as the definitive symbol of a beautiful, smiling, 14-year-old Emmett Till (Fig. 1).

Critical artists believe that Black art functions to illuminate the needs of Black people. Like Frances E. W. Harper, modern artists "reprimand" the racist culture that allowed Emmett Till's destruction, and they "represent" his voice by speaking his story, his manhood, and his e-raced future. It is their sacred duty to sing his song while attacking the socio-political climate that breeds racism. Passed from generation to generation, his is a story that they know, and while they do not bow to stereotypes, they do paint the stereotypes of Black males that made the young Emmett a target. Their tales reveals the beauty and goodness of the Blacks who because of 1955 rural Mississippi

changed their human condition. There is no shame, only quiet heroism and dignity in Mamie Till, Uncle Moses, the Pullman Porters, and the world mourners. Till's story is one from the masses of Black people rendered in the Black cultural traditions of the blues, sermons, storytelling, signifying, and call and response. These artists are informed about Black life and advance their agenda with a social consciousness that sees progress since Till but realize that progress is not mission accomplished. They write that Blacks have more than one enemy, but that One seems to spawn the others. These artists own and protect Emmett Till's image, as the village should have owned and protected Emmett Till. From Slavery to Black Power artists have prescribed the functional purpose of art. The function here is to let this child be the last Emmett Till.

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APPENDIX

Images

Figure 1. Smiling Emmett Till

Figure 2. Emmett and Mamie Till

Figure 3. Uncle Moses Wright and Mamie Till

Figure 4. The Death Photo of Emmett Till

Figure 5. Iconic Photo of Hanging Black Men